

Writing notes



Philip Dine

The offerings discussed at daily newsroom story meetings for the next day’s newspaper or the evening broadcast are often shorthanded as two categories of fare—broccoli or dessert.

The broccoli involves news that editors deem mandatory, because the public needs to know it. Maybe unexciting, but necessary—the latest economic figures, inside political wrangling, international trade issues.

To make it palatable, sprinkled here and there is the dessert—an entertaining feature, insightful profile, riveting analysis of a breaking news event. Journalists view this as the way to get the news consumer to, well, consume the dreary fare—or, even, as the reward for doing so.

With apologies, this column falls squarely in the first category. The hope is that it will prove useful, especially to the many of you who deliver our message by writing letters to the editor or commentary pieces for your local newspapers, or by going on TV or radio to provide information on postal matters.

What follows are small thoughts on writing—not grand theories but some practical pointers.

The purpose here: to boost our mission of getting the message out. You get the little things right, avoid obvious mistakes—and two things happen.

First, your message is more effective. If you’re clear, it’s easier to follow. If you’re efficient, you have more space/time to get across what’s important. Most of all, your presentation will be taken more seriously by readers, listeners or viewers. You will have greater credibility with them if the word usage and grammar resonate with them. They have to take your postal information largely on faith because they’re not familiar with the details; they’re likelier to give you the benefit of the doubt if you ace the part that they may well know about.

Also, your work is likelier to get to them in the first place, i.e. get published, if it’s largely error-free. Editors receive far more submissions than they can use, so they’re always looking for reasons to reject a given piece. Imprecise writing or wordiness are an easy rationale. Not only does fixing them require time and work on their end, it makes them less likely to have confidence in the arguments you’re making (see prior paragraph).

Here, then, are a few notions, mostly gleaned from observing the news media, some from editing this magazine.

- Do not capitalize political positions, unless the name of the office holder directly follows, whether you’re talking about senators, presidents or others. So, you met with a senator; a former president attended the meeting; but

Secretary of State John Smith addressed the assembly. (Exception to this rule: the Speaker of the House—lest it be confused with someone merely speaking in the House.)

- If you decide to use a word you’re not used to using, look it up first. If, for example, you want to emphasize the size of a union’s political efforts, don’t talk about the enormity of those efforts. Enormity doesn’t mean what it sounds like it means—you’re describing those efforts as evil. If you don’t want to look it up, stick to the usual terms: scope, breadth, reach, extent, etc.
- Seven of the 12 months, when written as part of a date, are abbreviated, as in Aug. 15. They are January, February, August, September, October, November and December. Five are written out, as in July 18; they are March, April, May, June and July. Two easy ways to remember—write out those with five letters or fewer/the five consecutive months starting with March.
- Lose unnecessary words. When possible, for example, avoid the phrase “In order to...”. Rather than “In order to accomplish their objectives...” write “To accomplish their objectives...”
- Avoid redundancy. Don’t say, for example, that a congressman set a new fundraising record. Can you set an old record? Similarly, before using the word different, think twice. What, for example, does it add to say that someone went to five different cities on his speaking tour or that the senator held three different elected positions prior to her current one?
- Be precise and sparing with the language. Don’t say someone served in the U.S. Army; Army suffices. If someone served in the French Navy, that’s when we specify the country. And don’t call someone a former veteran; it makes no sense. He *is* a veteran. Meanwhile, we live in the United States, not in America; USPS contributes to the U.S. economy, not the American economy. Say based on, or depends on, not upon; among, not amongst; amid, not amidst. Saves space, less pretentious.

We’ll return to this topic periodically. Feel free to offer your own examples; we’ll try to run them.

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