

Words and comedy



Philip Dine

I frequently write about the feats and accomplishments of letter carriers on or off the route, discuss NALC's communications efforts or address the self-inflicted woes of today's news media. Yet, to my surprise, the strongest reactions sometimes are prompted by what might appear to be an unexciting topic: words and grammar and language.

A recent postcard from Arizona got right into it: *Thx for the trip down memory lane. My mom often admonished, "the reason is never 'because,' the reason is THAT."*

After some more examples, the card ended: *The internet is hastening the morphing of our language, but I sure wish today's writers knew "between v. among" or "less v. fewer,"*

but I'm not holding my breath! Thx again!

The signature was from Rex Kennedy, reacting to May's column, "Crafting the message," which included this: *Be a stickler for correct grammar and word use, to retain your credibility. It's always wrong to say, "The reason the supervisor disciplined the worker is because..." Instead say, "The reason the supervisor disciplined the work is that..." A reason can't be "because"; it has to be the actual factor in play.*

Rex, I subsequently learned, carried mail for some 30 years in Springfield, MO, following five years as a postal clerk and a two-year Army stint, before retiring in 2018. He was highly active with Springfield Branch 203, including as a steward and—fittingly—as a branch scribe.

Thereby inspired (though, truth be told, it doesn't take much for me to get into this topic—ask anyone in the building), I'll cite some word misuses I've recently noticed. The reason, of course, is the importance of *how* we present our message to the public and the politicians about postal issues.

Case in point: Newspaper editors get far more op-ed submissions than they can possibly run, so the first task is to eliminate perhaps 90 percent. If the lead's wordy or confusing, they're quickly on to the next prospect—they have no time for heavy editing, plus they'll question your chops vis-à-vis the topic at hand.

The common theme here is eliminating unnecessary words—which waste valuable space/time, clutter things up, leave readers/listeners unsure what we're saying, and diminish our credibility. Easy fix—just avoid redundant words. As it happens, they're rarely nouns or verbs but rather modifiers—adjectives or adverbs.

There seems to be a surge in gratuitous use of "successfully," as in "The new rules successfully improved food safety"

or "Lobbyists successfully convinced the senator to reconsider his vote." As opposed to unsuccessfully? If you improved safety or persuaded the senator, success is implicit.

A few hours ago, I heard a political figure say on the radio, "I was a former DNI myself." You'd think a director of national intelligence, who analyzes words all day long, would have a better grasp of the language. He *is* a former DNI, or he was a DNI. Similarly, military veterans are sometimes referred to as "a former vet." The term "veteran" already places his service in the past; calling someone a former vet means they are no longer a veteran. Huh?

Don't say, "The legislation was first introduced in February." Lose the 'first.'

Once upon a time, the word "priority" stood proudly alone to signify something that took precedence over all else, as in, "The new CEO's priority is to increase sales." Unambiguous. Gradually, it was watered down to usages such as, "The candidate's top five priorities are..." Carefully read, that translates into listing the first five of a greater number. Now, one often hears of "a very high priority." Sheer gibberish; if you have to put so many qualifiers in front of it, it's merely a goal to be aspired to.

Sometimes, unneeded words result from a sentence's structure. Rather than writing "It is my aim to..." simply say "My aim is to..." Better yet, turn the noun into a verb, as in, "I aim to."

If you've waded through this, let's close with some comic relief.

Pittsburgh's ABC affiliate wanted an on-camera interview with a letter carrier in mid-June, and Branch 84 President Ted Lee agreed. For my part, I gave the reporter some written info to provide context for her interview.

Post-interview, Ted emailed me that it had gone well, while wryly adding that "she did label me Phil Dine under me while I spoke—so if I said anything wrong it's on you, lol."

Unsurprisingly, Ted, who's been to the rodeo before and who brings the discipline of someone who wore the uniforms of both the Air Force and the Army National Guard, said everything right. Thank you, Ted!

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