

Crafting the message



Philip Dine

In March, we discussed the three-step process of effectively communicating NALC's message: determining the relevant theme at a given time, crafting it to achieve maximum impact, then delivering it to the public and policymakers by interacting with those idiosyncratic folks known as journalists.

Given your superb track record both in identifying the existential challenges facing us and in dealing with media outlets, we homed in on the second aspect cited above: producing persuasive messages.

As noted at the time, the column was heavy on theory and overall approach but light on concrete examples; we added that we'd "revisit the topic with examples moving forward."

So, buckle up. What follows will be brisk and terse, for dual reasons. There's much to address in limited space. Moreover, concise and efficient word use is, well, sort of the whole point. You engage in fluff, you meander or ramble, and two things result—you obscure your point(s) and eventually you lose your audience.

We'll focus on three essential areas:

- Be succinct and disciplined in your wording, lest key points be lost amid excessive verbiage or not even made, if verbosity squeezes them out.
- Be clear and unambiguous in your phrasing, lest the audience be confused or even misinterpret what you mean.
- Be accurate in your word usage and grammar, lest readers, viewers and listeners question your chops and be less favorably disposed to your message.

One way to write tightly is to use verbs instead of nouns when possible. Instead of "I'm a firm believer in the importance of early voting," say, "I believe that early voting is important." You've not only cut a third; you've also identified the issue at the outset rather than forcing your audience to first wade through other words. Don't say the governor's positions "are in conflict with his party's views"; rather, they "conflict with his party's views."

Trim the transitions and delete redundancies. "That having been said" should be "that said." Never say, "He set a *new* record"—by definition, if you set a record, it's new. The legislator didn't cite three *different* reasons why her party lost; she cited three reasons. Obviously they're different or there'd just be one reason.

Ambiguity or lack of clarity can result from poor word placement. For instance, "The senator promised to be mindful of the needs of letter carriers when he spoke at the Democrat-

ic National Convention..." means, taken literally, that for that limited period he respected us. Better, "The senator promised, when he spoke at the Democratic National Convention, to be mindful of the needs of letter carriers..."

Similarly, the word "only" is almost invariably misplaced, creating confusion. A few minutes ago, I heard on the radio, "Only call if you want to file a complaint." That told listeners not to write, not to visit, but to contact the agency solely by phone. What the speaker meant was, "Call only if you want to file a complaint," i.e., don't call for any other reason.

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 worker is *that*..." A reason can't be "because"; it has to be the actual factor in play. Better yet, "The supervisor disciplined the worker because..." That's simultaneously grammatically proper *and* shorter.

Don't conflate similar words. "There were two *incidences* of federal overreach last month" should be two "*incidents*." Incidence doesn't mean event; it means rate of occurrence; i.e., the more incidents of burglary there are, the higher the incidence. Similarly, historical and historic aren't interchangeable. A historical book addresses history. A historic book is groundbreaking and can be about anything.

This category also extends—when speaking—to pronunciation, including the different emphasis between verbs and nouns. You conTRAST two policies, but you draw a CONTRast between them. His actions conFLICT with the statute, but there's a CONFLICT between them. You support PROgress, but things proGRESS slowly. (Verb forms typically emphasize the second syllable.) Not everyone will recognize that you nailed it, but you'll win over those who do.

While this was, indeed, a cursory look at the topic, two takeaways, please. Absorb these specific examples and find others that in your experience flow from them. More broadly, apply these general principles when crafting a message. This goes for composing a letter to the editor or op-ed; being interviewed by a newspaper/TV/radio reporter; or, to some degree, addressing a rally.

As you continue to set the standard in communicating with the press, public and pols, we're here when needed.

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