



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LABOR PRESS
INFORMED MEMBERS BUILD SOLIDARITY

WRITING AND EDITING TIPS

FROM THE ILCA

Scanned in from original union-printed hardcopy

Newsletters and other communications from local unions are critically important sources of information for members about what their union is doing for them.

Sometimes members find out what's going on from coworkers, shop stewards, or local union representatives. More often, they read about the union in the commercial press or hear news on television -- and we all know that the "straight" press doesn't always get the story right.

The labor press provides an alternative voice to the commercial press. Local union newsletters provide news that members can't and won't get elsewhere, such as information on:

Contract negotiations and contract provisions; Health and welfare; Workplace safety; Rights on the job; Laws that give workers new rights, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act and Americans with Disabilities Act; Boycotts and other labor news in the community; Local union organizing, community outreach, and benefits programs; Grievance settlements; Industry-related news that affects members' employers and their jobs; Union Privilege programs, such as the Union MasterCard and home mortgage programs; Members involved in interesting activities or projects.

Informed members are more likely to become active members. And committed activists are the key to the labor movement's future.

SOME SIMPLE TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE WRITING

DON'T PANIC-- THIS ISN'T AN ENGLISH LESSON

DON'T LET WRITING INTIMIDATE YOU

IDENTIFY THE AUDIENCE

It's a fact of life that most people don't like to write. For many, this aversion stems from junior high school, where English teachers reprimanded, "Don't split infinitives!" "Don't end a sentence with a preposition!" and "Get rid of dangling participles!"

A lot of us still aren't quite sure what a participle is, much less a dangling one.

As a result of such negative experiences with the English language, countless writers and would-be writers are hesitant about putting their ideas on paper (or the computer screen), fearful of committing a syntax error or grammatical sin.

Don't let writing intimidate you. If it's not perfect, so what?

The point of writing is to get a message across clearly and simply, not to win the Pulitzer Prize or impress a college professor with how many five-syllable words you know. The most important part of the writing process is to get it on paper. Let ideas flow. Commit them to paper first and fine-tune the details later.

Words are tools, and effective writing can go a long way toward strengthening the labor movement by educating people about the issues that affect their lives and motivating them to action.

First, think about who your audience is. Then shape the message accordingly. Are you trying to reach current members who already know what the term "collective bargaining" means? Or maybe the audience is unorganized workers who may not be familiar with such terms as "outsourcing" or "OSHA. "

USE COMMON SENSE

KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE

Avoid jargon and obscure words. Don't use names, terms, or initials that aren't immediately understandable. A new union member may not know what "NLRB" means. And it's easy for non-experts to forget the difference between 8(a)(2) and 8(a)(3) charges and exactly what a IO(j) is. The faster and more clearly you can get your message across, the more likely it is to be remembered.

Perhaps most importantly, **break the rules when it makes sense to**. Don't worry about always being grammatically correct. Sometimes it sounds too stilted.

An example: *"To whom should we give the job?"* sounds too formal. Even though the grammar gurus would cringe at ending a sentence with a preposition, this sounds better: *"Who should we give the job to?"* Do what you think makes sense.

You answer to your readers, not your junior high English teacher.

Good writers live by the "KISS" principle. One version of the acronym is "Keep it short and simple." The more commonly used version is "Keep it simple, stupid."

Here are some tips for clear, effective writing.

Use short sentences and short words.

Short words can be stronger than long ones.

WEAK

Inform Reduce Modify Indicate

STRONG

Say, Tell **Cut** Change Show

Look for strong verbs. Strong verbs are ones that relate to the five senses -touch, sight, smell, sound, and taste - and to familiar emotions; they're short and personal. Some examples: Run, fight, love, demand, spark, attack. Weak verbs are impersonal. Some examples: Employ, postpone, construct.

Pay attention to using gender-neutral language. For example, use "letter carrier" instead of "mailman."

Here are some other non-sexist substitutions: Representative: Congressman; Worker: Workman; Humanity: Mankind; Supervisor: Foreman; Artificial or synthetic: Man-made; In solidarity or In unity: Fraternally yours.

Use active, not passive, sentence construction. Example: "Pierre suggested" uses three fewer words than "It was suggested by Pierre."

Be specific and concrete. Give your writing heat, weight, color, and sound. General and abstract ideas are boring. Here are some examples. **GENERAL:** *The annual convention was well attended.* **SPECIFIC:** *Eighty-five people came to the convention.* **GENERAL:** *Members will have an opportunity to give feedback.* **SPECIFIC:** *Let your local union know what you think. Go to the membership meeting on Friday, April 8 and speak out.. Use as few words as possible. Get to the point quickly.*

.Tell the story from the members' point of view; personalize it.

.Let your readers know why they should care about what they're reading. Members constantly ask, "What does this mean for me?" Try to answer the question before they ask it Make sure you point out how the event you're writing about affects your readers' lives.

.Use quotes.

.Use humor where appropriate.

WRITING LEADS

The first few sentences in the opening paragraph of a story are called the lead. The lead's purpose is to get the reader interested enough in the story to continue reading -- and also to provide basic information on what the story is about.

In a news story, the lead should concentrate on the "pay-off," rather than the process. Even if the reader stops after the first paragraph, at least part of the message will have been delivered.

4.

WRITING A NEWS STORY: DIFFERENT LEADS TO TRY

For example, the reader should know in the first few sentences whether the contract was ratified or the plant organized. It's less important to know how many bargaining sessions it took to get to the final settlement or how many different handbills were used in the campaign.

You don't have to stuff everything into the lead or headline, though. Sometimes it's easier to write the lead and/or the headline after writing the bulk of the story, when the most important points become obvious.

The lead should be no more than two or three sentences, but also can be just one word.

Journalists use a variety of standard leads. The most common is the "summary lead," used in news stories. The summary lead addresses the following issues in the first paragraph or two: *Who, what, where, when, why, how.*

What happened? **Where and when** did it happen? **Why** did it happen? **Who** was involved? Mention specific people and include direct quotes. **How** did it happen? What led up to the event? And, importantly, **why** should your readers care.

Example: Some 300 workers employed by the most prestigious brokerage firms in New York City voted unanimously on September 13 for union representation in a National Labor Relations Board election. A spokesperson for the brokers explained that their main objective in unionizing is to protect the professionalism of brokers through a union contract.

Or only one of the "5- W s and H" can be used.

Example: A shop steward in the trading pit. That very likely will be part of the Wall Street scene in the near future.

(Follow this with other pertinent facts of the story.)

Or a question can be used as the lead.

Example: Can Wall Street be organized? (Be sure to answer your question early in the story to avoid leaving the reader with the impression of being conned.)

The same technique can be used substituting the who, why, when, where or what-even the how. Make sure it emphasizes the most dramatic element of the story.

There are lots of other less conventional ways to lead a news story. Here are some examples.

.Compare and contrast lead -- Compares a well-known fact with the lesser known facts contained in your news story.

Example: Infantry soldiers who stormed Normandy Beach on D-Day had a better chance of surviving battle than workers at General Corp. have to reach retirement without being injured on the job.

.Quotation lead -- An effective way to handle a speech story, especially if the speaker made the key point in a colorful but brief way.

Example: "This debate about health care is not just about those who are insured. It's about the future of health care benefits for all of us who are insured." That's the message that President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered to hundreds of union members in a series of appearances in Washington, D. C. and New York as they rallied support for the President's health care reform plan.

.Literary allusion lead -- Used sparingly, these can be effective.

Example: "The British are coming! The British are coming!" That was the word when a group of five union leaders from the United Kingdom visited Local 245's headquarters last week.

ARRANGING THE STORY

There's no one technique or "formula" for putting a story together. But here are some suggestions.

News stories traditionally start with the most important facts and follow with supporting facts in order of descending importance. That way the message still is delivered even if the story is cut or the reader doesn't read to the end.

"How-to" stories can serve a variety of useful purposes. Union representatives frequently are a wealth of knowledge, and can be an excellent source for story ideas. "How-to" stories can educate members about their rights on the job -- such as safety regulations, the Family and Medical Leave Act, or how the prescription plan works. These types of stories not only inform members about specific work-related issues of concern, but they also help point out the many benefits of union membership.

Personalized stories are often the most readable. Few people besides accountants and demographers are fascinated by statistics. But that doesn't mean that labor communicators shouldn't talk about the federal budget deficit, declining living standards for American working families, or the number of jobs NAFTA has cost. Blend personal stories with the larger points to make them more compelling and real. Tell the story from the point of view of the reader.

For example, figure out what one of your members' individual share of the federal budget deficit is and discuss how it affects his/her lifestyle (can s/he afford to buy a home or a new car?), his/her tax bill, and his/her kids' prospects for higher education.

As the number of unionized workers declines, so do living standards. This story can be told from the point of view of union workers, who can provide first-hand comments about the benefits of a union contract and what it means for his/her family's security and future.

Interviewing and quoting members also lets readers know that the union is more than elected officers or paid representatives. It underscores the point that every member counts. Most people are more interested in reading articles that quote their friends or people like them than those that read like a lecture from an Ivy League economist.

HEADLINES

As with leads, having a good headline often determines whether the reader will read the story. Here are some tips for writing good headlines:

.It's okay to be clever, but not overly cute. The point is to amuse, entertain, tease, or pique the reader's interest--but not make him/her groan.

.Never mislead. You don't have to tell the whole story, but don't be inaccurate either.

.Use short, simple, familiar words instead of long ones: Pact vs. Agreement; Talks vs. Negotiations; Dip vs. Decline; Rise or Gain vs. Increase; Aid vs. Help or Assist

.Use present tense.

.Avoid dullness. Never use: "Meeting Held" "Negotiations Continue" "Committee Will Study Problem" "Study Completed" "Program Initiated." These headlines are deadly because they're meaningless.

.Be careful about using words that could have obscene, offensive, or misleading double meanings. For example, a major business magazine ran this headline for a story about competition in the retail food industry: "Warehouse Clubs Butt Heads." Unionized grocery workers who find their jobs in jeopardy because of the expansion of these low-wage, nonunion conglomerates may agree, but that wasn't the author's intent. The Meany Center's Louise Walsh cites in her writing class an article about home canning that ran in a national newspaper. The headline: "How to Put Pickles Up Yourself." No comment needed.

EDIT FOR CONSISTENCY AND CLARITY

PROOF PROOF PROOF

BE CONSISTENT

Editing -- the process of going back over what you or someone else has written and fine-tuning it -- is important for consistency and clarity. Read the piece and ask yourself whether a reader will immediately understand the point.

Reading the story out loud can help you determine whether it works. It should sound a lot like a normal conversation. If it doesn't, then it probably needs rewriting.

No matter how good a writer you may be, it's hard to edit your own work. The same goes for proofreading. If feasible, let someone else do it. Humans sometimes have a tendency to overlook or block out their own errors. Another set of eyes can be invaluable.

Proofreading is an important part of editing. Make sure names are spelled correctly. Don't assume when someone's name is Karen Smith that it's spelled that way. It could be Caryn Smythe or Carron Smithe. Few things infuriate people more than having their name misspelled.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE FOR THE COMPUTER AGE: Don't rely on the "spell check" on your computer to find mistakes.

The computer can't tell the difference between "stake" and "steak." They're both bona fide words, but the meaning of your story can dramatically change if they're interchanged.

Use a consistent style throughout the publication. If you use standard abbreviations for states, for example (like Mass., Mich., and Calif.), don't start using postal codes (MA, MI, CA) on the third page. It's confusing.

Editors use different rules--for example, some put a comma before the final "and" in a series, some don't. Some capitalize "Congressional," others don't. The Washington Post, New York Times, Associated Press, the Chicago Tribune, and others each publish style books (also called a desk book) that spell out the rules they use for capitalization, punctuation, abbreviations, number usage, and acronyms. You can select one of these standard styles or make up your own.

CUT, AND BE RUTHLESS

The most important point is to be consistent: if you use the numeral 10 on page one, don't use "ten" on page four. If the subject of your story is "Ms. Franklin," don't switch half-way through the article and refer to her by her first name. It doesn't matter whether you spell out "percent" or use the % symbol, but do it the same way throughout.

When you're done with the article, go back and see what you can cut. Don't be hesitant. Take out all unnecessary words. If readers have to wade through a lot of confusing or extraneous words to get to the point, they'll tune out.

An important corollary to the "KISS" principle is this: When in doubt, leave it out.

A critical part of the editor's job is to *eliminate needless redundancy* -- or in simpler English, *cut*. Some examples:

At this point in time: Now

In the event that: If

At the same time that: While

Give consideration to: Consider

Until such time as: Until

In regard to: About

Future plans: Plans

Past experience: Experience

Here are some needlessly redundant phrases to avoid at all costs:

End results; New initiatives; Serious crisis; Important essentials; Final outcome.

And a final one: *Utilize*. This is a prime example of the tendency some writers have to use 25-cent words when nickel ones will do. (Use *use* instead.)

A WORD ABOUT WRITER'S BLOCK

Everyone gets stuck sometimes. You can help get your creative juices flowing again by getting up and walking away from your computer or typewriter. Take a look out the window, take a deep breath, and ask yourself, "What is it that I'm trying to say?" Then say it out loud to yourself or someone else.

Don't try to be too profound or perfect in your writing. Skip parts that make you get stuck-like the lead or the conclusion-and go back and fill them in later.

RESOURCES

There are some excellent resources available to help beleaguered editors with writing and newsletter production. Here are some of the best:

.How to Do Leaflets, Newsletters and Newspapers updated version, by Nancy Brigham with Maria Catalfo and Dick Cluster. Available through the ILCA or from **PEP** Publishers, 3519 Yorkshire, Detroit, Mich. 48224.

.The Elements of Style, by William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White. Available at bookstores.

.New York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, and AP style books.

.Words that Count Women In, Ontario Women's Directorate. Available by writing or calling the Directorate at 2 Carlton Street, 12th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5B 2M9 Canada; (416) 314-0292.

.Check your local bookstore for other writing guides.

(Source: UFCW)

COMMUNICATING TO A DIVERSE MEMBERSHIP

IDENTIFY COMMON GROUND

Demographic changes in the workplace mean that labor communicators are now reaching out to a much broader and diverse audience. Being sensitive to diversity and language differences among people you're trying to reach -- members as well as potential members -- is critically important, whether it's through a newsletter, handbill, or even a billboard. Use basic common sense.

Management often tries to separate people who have different languages, genders, occupations, ages, ethnic backgrounds, and religions. It's our job to build bridges among people by identifying and communicating what we share in common.

Despite differences, racial and ethnic groups share lots of common ground. Social values, methods of communication, and common interests all can cross cultural boundaries -- and that's where labor communicators come in.

Choosing the right message and communicating so people understand is critical. One of the best ways to make sure you're on the right track is to involve the workers themselves. Ask them if the draft you've done of the "come to a meeting" flyer works. If they say no, find out what you can change to make it work.

Establish common ground around common concerns and union principles. For example, concerns that are common to everyone include family issues. Common goals include job security, good wages and benefits.

One technique for underscoring common ground is to interview members of different backgrounds on a specific subject, such as the plant's new safety program or what the top priorities for the new contract should be. Workers from different backgrounds and speaking different languages stating similar views can help underscore common concerns that can be addressed through collective action.

Consider producing separate versions of the same material in different languages if workplace demographics warrant.

BE AWARE OF DIALECTS

Be alert to dialect differences among people who speak the same language. For example, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Central American workers all speak Spanish. But their dialects and slang are different. Phrases that make sense to one group may be nonsensical to the others.

Also be aware of cultural differences and how people have different views of unions based on different experiences in their home countries. Not all words translate from one language to another. An article that discussed management "terrorizing" workers (written in English) had an entirely different meaning when translated to Spanish and read by Central American workers. Ask a native speaker to check the translation for accuracy.

AVOID STEREOTYPING

Avoid racist and sexist stereotyping. For example, even some communicators who consider themselves to be "politically correct" fall into gender stereotyping, such as portraying women worrying about their weight, doing laundry, and cooking, and men mowing the lawn, watching football, and drinking beer. It may not offend you, but it may annoy someone you're trying to organize.

DIVERSITY MEANS STRENGTH

Diversity is one of the labor movement's greatest sources of strength. Tapping workers' common ground is a key element to effective communications that can help build a stronger labor movement

(Source: UFCW)

COPY-EDITING SYMBOLS

Corrections, additions, or deletions to written, typed, or printed copy are made by using shorthand symbols.

Following are some of the most commonly used copy marks.

Delete		Six million new new jobs were created
Delete and close up		during the first two years
Stet (retain)		of the Clinton ^{STET} administration.
Paragraph	# or L	Labor leaders hailed the accomplishment.)
Run in same paragraph		It reversed a 14-year trend.
No paragraph, run in	NO #	President Clinton also called for
Transpose		a 90-cent increase in the minimum wage.
Use figures		In the past forty years,
Spell out		only 2 increases have been adequate.
Abbreviate		Representative Jim Jeffords (R-Vermont)
Capitalize		was the first <u>republican</u> to endorse
All capitals		the measure. The <u>afl-cio</u> said that the
Lower case	<i>i.c.</i>	proposed increase was not nearly enough
Set in Italic type	<i>ITAL</i>	to offset the <u>downward</u> trend in buying

Set in boldface	power that <u>low-wage</u> workers have lost
Separate (add space)	because the minimum wage has failed to #
Insert hyphen	keep pace with the cost-of-living needs
Insert quotation marks	of so-called "underprivileged families." ✓
Insert apostrophe	The administration's strategy is to
Insert comma	work with the labor movement low-income
Insert period	advocates and other groups.
Insert colon	The effort will entail the following:
Insert semicolon	mobilizing workers, citizens and other
Insert dash	allied groups especially grassroots
Insert question mark	organizations. Why? It's important
Insert missing letter/word	to personalize this <u>critical</u> fight.
Move to left	[Move to left margin
Move to right] Move to right margin
Parentheses	It's important (only in the long run)
Indent both sides (center)] Center headline or phrase [
Spell word as written	The computer has 16 megabytes of RAM.
End of story	Indicate end of story below last sentence. # OR -30-
