



# Improve Collaboration at Your Newspaper

Forty ways to improve collaboration at your newspaper

By Bob Baker

You're trying to explain our business to your teenage daughter, who has already decided she'll work for MTV. You find yourself rhapsodically describing those moments when a disaster hits and everybody has to pull together, and how miraculous it feels the next day when you see the paper on your doorstep and everything we did--yeah we--worked!

And then you go into the newsroom the next day and all you're confronted with is tension--reporters bitching about their line editors, line editors bitching about the copy desk. Most of the time people are perfectly polite, but the atmosphere is still pretty much the culture of lone wolves, far short of the collaboration that tough times bring out.

How can we get that magic back? Here, submitted for your consideration, are four sets of guidelines--what reporters want from editors, what editors want from reporters, what copy editors want from line editors, and what line editors want from copy editors.

Print them out, find somebody who's pissed you off and hand him or her a copy. Promise each other to try harder for the next two weeks. Treat it like marriage counseling. See what happens:

## **10 THINGS REPORTERS WANT FROM EDITORS**

1. I want you to listen to me. I want your full, undivided attention. I don't want you staring at your screen, or answering computer messages, or taking phone calls when we're talking about a story. I know you're busy, but when you have time for me, make it matter.
2. I want to be able to brainstorm with you. To bounce ideas off you without feeling like you automatically have to pass judgment. I want you to contribute, not dominate.
3. I want you to respect my syntax. I want to feel as though as long as I'm writing clearly and purposefully, the choice of words is up to me. I want to sound like me, not you.

4. I want you to help me improve the integrity of my story. Concentrate on structure, not picky copy-editing. Tell me what ideas or images don't work or can be improved. Develop a structural vocabulary that can articulate this. Help me bring more context, wisdom and perspective to my work.
5. Don't rewrite me unless you have to. If we're not on deadline, tell me what you want me to do differently, send the story back to me and let me try to do it myself.
6. As the reporting process unfolds, let me discover the story. Hold back on prejudging it, or dictating how I should pursue it. Let me explore the landscape and learn from it.
7. Tell me the truth. If a story has been targeted for a certain placement, length or tone by your bosses, tell me what politics are involved, what battles we'll have to fight, why the story is holding, or why it needs to be cut. Let me participate in the idiocy that sometimes colors our business.
8. Play the role of a reader for me. Make fewer pronouncements and ask more questions-- questions that demonstrate your interest and help me understand how certain sentences or combinations trigger certain questions in a reader's mind.
9. Balance the way I'm used. Keep track of the proportion of stories I do at your suggestion versus the proportion that are my ideas. Give me opportunities to discover the best part of myself, and to use that part when you make assignments, or are talking to other editors about assignments. Talk to me, even if it's only once a year, about what my goals are, for next year and for five years from now.
10. Get off your butt and walk around. Feel the newsroom. Be a part of it, of us, the reporters. Don't be a bureaucrat. Be a leader.

## **TEN THINGS EDITORS WANT FROM REPORTERS**

1. I want you to respond with 100% effort to each assignment, whether it's your idea or mine.
2. I want you to trust me. I want you to see me as someone who cares as much, or more, as you do about what we're producing. Many things I ask you to do may not directly benefit you, but will have indirect benefits down the line.
3. I want you to meet our agreed-upon length and time requirements.
4. I want you to be as appreciative of a good edit as I am of a good reporting and writing job. I want you to appreciate what two brains can do together.

5. I want you to remember that photos matter. I want you to work conscientiously with the Photo Desk and think visually.
6. I want you to put your heart into the story, to discover not only the factual truth but the emotional truth--what really matters to the readers, to the characters in your story, to our society. I want that hunger every time.
7. I want you to take your job seriously but not personally. I want you to be able to lose without it breaking your heart, whether it's not getting a story on Page 1 or having it held a day, or having the lead changed by someone above us. I want you to understand that nobody wins 'em all, that tomorrow is another opportunity, that there are no "enemies" in the newsroom. I need you to believe this because...
8. ...I want you to be aggressive, creative, resourceful, audacious, dramatic--even if you tried being all those things yesterday and it didn't work. If our newspaper is only as good as the readers expect it to be, it's a failure. We have to transcend their expectations. We have to astonish and delight and amaze and surprise and dazzle them in our explanations of how the world works.
9. If I suggest a rewrite and you don't like it, I want you to articulate your position forcefully, but I also expect you to be able to come up with an alternative rather than simply digging in your heels. Be willing to give another version a try. I'm willing to listen; I may even learn something.
10. Realize that I respect and appreciate your need to share, but I am burdened by several other reporters and other administrative demands. Don't take it personally if I seem distracted sometimes.

The goal here is to better understand the other side's point of view. I know as a reporter it always pissed me off not to get my way. I was convinced that everybody was either part of the solution or part of the problem, and too often I found myself treating my line editors and copy editors as part of the problem. I wish somebody had confronted me with the reality of those jobs. It wouldn't have shut me up entirely but it would have modified--matured--my behavior.

Let's try it with the line editor-copy editor dynamic. I compiled these demands jointly with veteran L.A. Times copy editor Mike Castelvechi:

## **TEN THINGS COPY EDITORS WANT FROM LINE EDITORS**

1. We realize you need to be an advocate for the reporters and encourage them to take risks but have the courage to tell them when their stories don't work.

2. Stylish writing is invalidated by bad grammar, bad spelling and other rudimentary flaws.
3. Encourage more hard-news leads. Our overuse of anecdotal or feature-style leads--particularly ones that are too long--tends to make the newspaper insubstantial.
4. If a high-level editor has ordained that something in the story is sacred, clue us in so it won't get cut in a pinch.
5. Try to avoid being defensive when we ask a question that challenges a story. We don't mean it personally. The same way reporters bring a sense of skepticism to the way they view the world, we must bring a similar sensibility to each story we edit as the last line of defense. The fresh eye we bring to a story--even one that has been edited by five senior editors--is an insurance policy that the story won't leave tomorrow's reader with unanswered questions or uncertainties.
6. Check your math. Make sure the numbers, percentages, ratios and rates add up.
7. Stick to deadline, and put more pressure on your reporters to follow it. Do a better job of filing non-deadline features or news stories between 2 and 4 p.m. The copy desk's performance (and happiness) is directly related to the crush of late copy.
8. Do a spelling check on each story, and make sure your reporters know how to do this. It saves us all time, and eliminates the name that is spelled two different ways.
9. Take an hour to review the newspaper's stylebook. A lot of our time is taken up correcting simple style errors. The more time we save on that, the more we have for more substantial editing and headline
10. Remember courtesy and professional respect. We're not the enemy. We are all working toward the same goals: accuracy and a better paper.

## **TEN THINGS LINE EDITORS WANT FROM COPY EDITORS**

1. Remember courtesy and professional respect. We're not the enemy. We are all working toward the same goals: accuracy and a better paper.
2. Appreciate that when we miss deadline it's often because of circumstances we can't control, and that the story would be more time-consuming for you were we to file prematurely.
3. Try to phrase your questions so that the discussion is about the story, not the writer or the editor.

4. When you deal with a reporter directly, remember that many of these people are not as good orally as they are when they are expressing themselves in writing. Also remember that behind some of the arrogance is an insecure person.
5. Try to edit holistically. A phrase that, taken by itself, might seem odd or incomplete may well make sense to the reader in the context or tone of the paragraphs that came before.
6. Don't be so literal all the time. We know--and welcome--the fact that you need to read a story as literally as the reader will. But we also know that readers make allowances if the writer prepares them properly, or handles the story with a sense of style.
7. Let us have that sense of style. A writer should be able to use the expression "...doesn't float her boat" without having it automatically changed to "...fails to enthrall her." One line editor notes: We had a story recently in which a writer used "air guitar" as a verb, as in "he couldn't resist the urge to air guitar..." I'd seen air guitar in print before but not as a verb, and I was delighted that it made it into print. I don't want things to get out of control, but I like it when a writer tries coining a new phrase or even a new word. We should be willing to accept such attempts at wordplay--or at least not toss them aside immediately.
8. Rather than just delete such attempts at wordcraft, it would be handy if the copy editor consulted with the line editor on such things and not just the heavy-duty issues of libel and accuracy.
9. When you want to make a change, explain your context. If you can explain what triggered your concern, it's sometimes an easier sell because it puts the discussion in the context of how readers will react.
10. Accept that some reporters deserve higher levels of trust because of the way they have mastered their beats. Be willing, for example, to let attribution slide in some cases where the reporter has clearly proven his or her knowledge in the past.

The person who suffers most from the antagonism between copy editors, reporters and line editors "is not the writer or assigning editor or copy editor, but the reader," suggests John McIntyre, chief of the copy desk at the Baltimore Sun.

Everyone is entitled to an opinion: The writer has a stake. The assigning desk has an interest. The copy desk has a responsibility to raise questions. Ban the defensive remark, "My editor approved it, so why do you have questions about it?" from newsroom discussion.

Everyone gets heard: A valid question is valid, no matter who asks it and no matter at what point in the process. Tell reporters that questions from the copy desk are to be considered seriously and answered courteously. Tell copy editors to respect the intentions of the writer and

the assigning desk.

Everything is up for discussion: Yes, copy editors focus on spelling, punctuation, grammar and house style, but that is the beginning, not the limit. Newspapers are moving away from inverted-pyramid stories to longer articles with more sophisticated structures and varied tones. As that happens, questions about structure, narrative strategy, metaphor and voice become germane, and copy editors should be free to raise them.

The story to comes first: When a dispute that looks like a struggle to prevail makes its way on appeal to you, you must refocus the discussion on what works and does not work in the story, not on who wins. And get your people to talk to one another.

The story belongs to the newspaper: The reporter does the primary work and gets the byline to indicate that primacy, but the story is published by the paper, not the author, and the paper has the institutional responsibility for it. Tell your editors that they are expected to edit.

[Bob Baker](#) is an author, the creator of the [Newsthinking.com](#) site, and a reporter for the Los Angeles Times.

***You may reuse this material if you credit the author and ACES.***