



## The Editing Model

By [Gene Foreman](#)

Most editors really want good editing in their newspapers. They also would like to make the working lives of their copy editors better.

So why, if the boss has these genuinely good intentions, are copy editors the most frustrated group of professionals in the newsroom?

There's no simple answer to that question, but a good place to start is to examine how copy editors are positioned in the newsroom organization.

The traditional newsroom is organized strictly on departmental lines. The theory seems tantalizingly logical: Make each department a semiautonomous fiefdom. Put a good person in charge, and quality will surely result.

Unfortunately, copy editors are an afterthought in this organizational design. Although it makes sense to have departments to produce content, and to deploy copy editors to the departments, the problem lies in having copy editors report to the departmental editors. These departmental editors' professional lives quite naturally revolve around their reporters and their stories. It should not be surprising that so many of them neglect copy editors, viewing them as production technicians. So, one big reason for copy editors' malaise is that they report to editors who are not skilled in or attentive to their issues.

In addition, because departmental editors tend to perceive copy editors as interchangeable parts of what is often called "the production desk," they typically require copy editors to design pages as well as to edit copy. It is remarkable that this practice is so commonplace, because it has three major flaws: (1) Designing pages inevitably diminishes the time available for checking and improving copy, which is the copy desk's primary role. (2) It is counterintuitive to assume that individuals are equally skilled in page design and editing. (3) Combining duties leads to inconsistent and frequently substandard page design because that complex assignment is being done on a part-time basis.

Finally, the newspaper should be aiming for unified standards of writing and design, instead of

fragmenting the staff along departmental boundaries.

There is a better way to organize the newsroom, one that eliminates the built-in problems just mentioned:

- Keep the departments but focus them on the vital function of producing content.
- Have copy editors report through their desk chiefs to an editor - call him or her the "top slot" - who oversees the editing of copy throughout the paper.
- Make sure copy editors only edit copy; have page design done by specialists who have a similar chain of command leading to the individual who oversees the entire paper's design.

This plan, which I call The Editing Model, is based on the premise that all editing is done in three steps. The Editing Model assigns each step to a separate individual or unit. Thus there are three discrete categories of editors:

- Content editors (or assigning editors). These editors are responsible for coverage of a geographic area (e.g., city editor) or a specialized subject (e.g., sports editor). To carry out their responsibilities, they assign reporters or select stories from the wires. When assigning editors edit copy, they are primarily concerned with content - questions such as: Is the lede in the right place and is it supported by the facts in the story? Is the story accurate and fair? Does it have the right tone?
- News editors (page designers). These editors make judgments about the relative value of the available stories, photos and graphics; design pages that reflect those value judgments; and ensure that page deadlines are met.
- Copy editors. These editors ensure that all copy meets the paper's standards of language precision and style; write headlines, captions and other display type; and check final page proofs. As a vital secondary mission, they critically review content and back up the editing of the content editors. They approach copy as the readers would, and they are trained to articulate the kind of questions that a reader might have. Their isolation from the reporting process is a virtue.

Contrary to what many top editors think, only at the smallest papers is it necessary to combine two or all three of these functions in a single individual. (At a country weekly, the editor might not only do all three but also might write the story.) For most dailies, The Editing Model is feasible. Here's why it is more likely than the traditional model to result in a well-edited newspaper:

- Every story is read critically on three different desks. This increases the likelihood that mistakes or omissions will be detected and corrected. It also creates a beneficial workplace tension that fosters accountability and high standards. Because a reporter and a content editor sense that superficial reporting is going to be challenged, there is an

incentive - and a sense of pride - in getting it right the first time.

- Content editors no longer have to worry about copy desk staffing, allowing them to concentrate on directing their reporting staffs. Instead of reporting to content editors, copy editors and news editors are managed by editors who share their specialized skills and who better understand their workplace issues. The ultimate editor in the copy editors' chain of command, the top slot, has the ear of the editor and the managing editor. That way, copy desk problems can be dealt with before they fester.
- The copy editing function is honored. Whenever copy editing is combined with either of the other two functions, it is copy editing that gets short shrift when the deadline approaches. Just think about it: The paper will not come out if no one assigns the reporters or if no one designs the pages. It will come out, however flawed, if the copy is railroaded.
- Wire editing is not to be assigned to the copy desk except under controlled conditions. Like page design, these duties detract from the desk's primary mission. Further, it is logical that the content editors who assign reporters should also direct the work of editors who select content from the wires. In Sports, for example, wire copy is part of the nightly report, and the sports editor should control the content. This division of duties would not, however, prevent an arrangement whereby rim editors on the sports copy desk might compile the nightly baseball roundup. Such an arrangement would take place only after the sports editor and the top slot have approved it, and only if this wire-editing duty does not prevent the copy desk from performing its primary functions of editing copy and writing display type.
- The paper plays to the strengths of its editors. In particular, page design is done with editors who have a special talent for this work and who do it on a full-time basis. Having a centralized design structure eliminates the need for each department to identify back-up news editors to fill in during vacations and illnesses. These back-up staffers are often unskilled or untrained, or both - and these deficiencies are painfully apparent in their pages.

The Editing Model will not automatically resolve all conflicts. To the contrary, The Editing Model is bound to fail unless it is administered with a spirit of collaboration.

No matter how a newsroom is organized, relationships fall into two main categories: chain-of-command (a solid line on an organization chart) and lateral (a dotted line). A chain-of-command relationship is a boss/subordinate relationship; it ought to be an enlightened one, but there is no question about the pecking order. A lateral relationship is one of equals, and its success depends on collaboration and diplomacy. Put simply, it is wise to have copy editors report in a chain of command to a top slot, whose sole purpose is to oversee editing quality and to manage the working lives of copy editors. The same copy editors have a lateral relationship with the reporters and editors in the departments where they work.

- The system presumes goodwill on all sides and a common goal of serving the readers of

the newspaper.

- Department heads continue to be accountable for their sections, even though The Editing Model requires that they deal with copy editors and page designers on a lateral basis rather than a chain-of-command basis. Admittedly, for some department heads who relish control, this can be a psychological challenge.
- Editors are expected to collegially question each other's decisions as a matter of routine. For example, either the news desk or the copy desk might challenge all or part of a story offered by the city desk. On a close call in which the editors disagree, the city editor would prevail on a content matter - just as the news editor would prevail on a judgment of story play, or the copy editor on the wording of a headline.

Sometimes, however, the disagreement needs to be appealed. If an editor thinks a colleague is making a serious mistake, a higher-ranking editor must adjudicate. Although this might be delicate, the paper benefits in the long run from this kind of questioning.

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