

Start at the Copy Desk

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Every newly hired reporter should spend the first month on the copy desk, working as a fledgling copy editor to get firsthand experience in everything copy editors do and know.

Your copy desk knows everything going on in your newspaper. When I visit a newsroom to solve problems, I always spend several nights on the copy desk. Figuratively speaking, copy editors sit in the basement with transparent floors above them. From there, they can see everything, and it ain't all pretty.

Knowing the warts

After one month on the copy desk, a writer will know how the whole system works. The visitor will experience that great shocker for the new editor: raw copy. We assume all reporters can spell, explain complex issues, follow the stylebook, and write to length. We assume their desk editors apply the same skills to the copy that passes through them. What reaches the average copy desk each night dispels both assumptions.

The visitor will watch talented copy editors trying to make sense of stories when they can't reach the writer by phone, reconcile different spellings of names in body text and cutlines, and struggle to make pictures introduce stories they match only tangentially. The visitor will understand why we need teamwork and holistic thinking.

Knowing the players

New reporters will get to know the copy editors, and vice versa. Our systems create understandable hostilities between people who get their copy changed and the people who change it, and between people who write too long and those who have to shorten it. Journalists who work separately tend to demonize each other, especially if they don't know one another. Roy Clark and I once visited a large daily with the worst copy-editor relations we had ever seen; not one reporter in the newsroom could name a single copy editor who worked for the paper!

Knowing each other pays off big in late-night phone calls from the copy desk, a situation fraught with tension. Copy editors consult more readily with people they know than with those they don't, and reporters treat late-night callers with more cooperation and respect if they can picture their faces.

Knowing the consequences

No one who sits on a copy desk for a month will ever submit a story late. They will experience the disastrous results of something that happens almost every night on every copy desk. About 8:30 or 9 p.m., the ceiling suddenly pops open, and a wad of dreadful copy falls on the copy editors' heads all at once. The worst copy comes in at the same time (late), and gets the least attention from tired or absent desk editors.

Copy editors expect that deluge, and they resent it. They also start getting tired just before it arrives. Then they scramble to "shovel" all those stories too fast. In this "mixmaster," the whirling blades of editing mince copy that was defective before it arrived.

Knowing better

The reporter visitors will probably write headlines and cutlines at first, equipping them to suggest them later. Writers who suggest headlines have a firmer grasp of what their stories are about, the primary device for focus. And reporters who suggest cutlines get pictures that match their body text.

Finally, journalists who return to writing after a stint of editing usually write better. Editing makes them more conscious of the readers' needs in the story, and therefore heightens their awareness during reporting. Editing helps them write better sentences and design better structures. Editing builds confidence and therefore speed.

Aren't all these good effects worth a month's work for your new reporter?

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