



## Dealing With Big Stories on the Copy Desk

By [Kenn Finkel](#)

- Stay flexible. Don't get locked into a plan that becomes unwieldy or infeasible as a result of later developments.
- Be sure that all copy editors have a copy of the story budget, and encourage them to challenge items that they don't understand or have questions about.
- Be sure that everyone on the desk knows the plan, the hierarchy of copy flow, the times between editions and the deadlines.
- Be sure that several copy editors are assigned to handle all non-disaster copy — the material that is unrelated to the big, breaking story. Don't fall into the trap of pulling those editors away from what they're doing to help close a page or deal with other production tasks. That will ultimately result in missing deadlines, anyway, and it will destroy the integrity of the disaster-story action plan.
- Appoint one person from the desk to be the liaison with the rest of the newsroom. Any decisions from other desks or higher-ups that have to be transmitted to the copy desk should go through this person. Don't allow a bunch of reporters or assigning editors to bother copy editors. Let the reporters or other editors go through the liaison.
- Set up an orderly flow — which baskets, queues, etc. the copy will flow through from the time it arrives at the copy desk until it is typeset or placed into pages — as well as which copy editors should be handling what (obviously this will be subject to constant updating).
- Appoint someone to keep a log of all stories, when they arrive at the desk and when they are output or typeset. This log would also keep track of substitute paragraphs, inserts, corrections, etc.
- Be sure that all reference material is available immediately, and encourage the copy editors to use it. Paper or electronic clippings of previous material that has appeared in your newspaper or other newspapers on subjects like your big story are the first thing you think of. But other material — reference books, lists of Internet sites that might have pertinent information, other publications, etc. — should also be quickly at hand. People from the newsroom's library or information services section should be drafted to help here.

- Someone should be fed constant information on what other media (television, the Internet, etc.) are saying about the event. If no one from the copy desk is free to do this, then a copy editor should be in constant contact with another person in the newsroom who is. This doesn't mean, if television has information that conflicts with yours, that television is right and you're wrong. Far from it. But it's good to know what the other media are saying.
- Check for conflicts. One editor should look at all stories for consistency — and this should be done throughout the publishing cycle. You don't want the main story to say that 82 are dead and a sidebar to say that the number is 79. You don't want the main story to say that the father's name is Albert and a sidebar to say that his name is Alfred.
- Challenge copy. Ask yourself constantly, "how do we know this?" or "why is this fact more important than that one?"
- Be sure that the leads are justified in the bodies of the stories.
- In stressful situations such as disaster stories, reporters might be prone to overuse or misuse adjectives and adverbs. That's understandable; they're under stress, too. Help your reporters. Look for excess or incorrectly used modifiers and edit accordingly.
- Be aware, too, that, when reporters are in a hurry, they tend to write longer, less-polished sentences. Sometimes they resort to clichés when they're writing under stress. That's why you're editing the copy. Watch carefully for clichés, clutter and redundancy.
- Check each story to be sure that all questions are answered. Readers should come away from these stories with no questions that a reporter or editor hasn't answered (or explained why they can't be answered).
- Share thoughts with other editors and bounce ideas off them. Ask for help in crafting words for headlines. But always be aware that the purpose is to serve the readers — not to impress other editors.
- For headlines: use short words. Verbs should be strong — but appropriate.
- Get the main verb into the top line of multi-line headlines.
- Stay away from headlines that ask questions. Readers want answers, not questions.
- Keep headlines and cutlines simple. Stories with the magnitude of this one do not need to be hyped. If you try to over-sell, you could wind up looking silly or offensive — or both.
- Avoid word-play headlines at all costs.
- Be sure that some — but not all — headlines reflect a "what's next?" or "what does this mean for me?" angle. The person you appoint to be in charge of context and consistency can be a great help here.
- Check headlines on proofs. They often look or say something different on paper than they do on a computer screen.
- Stay flexible.

*Kenn Finkel, a long-time desk editor and supervisor at the Miami Herald, New York Times, Newsday and other newspapers, was doing a presentation Sept. 11, 2001, for API's Copy Editing Boot Camp when news arrived of the World Trade Center and Pentagon terrorist attacks. He wrote this article as advice for desk editors handling a*

*major breaking story.*