



The Craft of Copy Editing

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Thanks to John Schlander of the St. Petersburg Times, Roger Buddenberg of the Omaha World-Herald, Merrill Perlman of the New York Times News Service and Joel Pisetzner of the Newark Star-Ledger. Many of these tips are theirs. I believe I have attributed all the instances when I use their exact words, but their ideas are sprinkled throughout this handout.

Collaborate with Reporters

Too often copy editors and reporters are viewed as adversaries rather than collaborators. The best copy editors work with reporters to improve their stories and ensure accuracy.

Respect the writer's authorship. However good or bad a story is, the writer is the author. The writer's name goes on the story. The writer will hear any feedback from the public. The editor should always try to consult the writer about significant changes and should try to make changes in the writer's voice and style.

Respect the writer's knowledge. Before you change a fact, check with the writer, even if the writer isn't readily available. You may check your clips or another resource and be quite sure the writer has made an error. But maybe the writer found out that your earlier story was in error. Or maybe someone has been promoted or an organization has changed its name. Maybe the writer had to listen to a source complain about how your paper always misspells her name. Changing facts without consulting the reporter invites corrections and animosity.

Consult about headlines. Run your headline past the reporter if time allows. Maybe you've missed the point of the story (in which case, maybe the reporter needs to make the point clearer). The reporter can help prevent a headline that is inaccurate, misleading or potentially offensive. Encourage reporters to suggest headlines. This doesn't diminish your role, but might help the reporter focus her story.

This advice from Pisetzner: "Make friends, particularly with the reporters. Wander over at the start of your shift, compliment them on pieces they wrote, talk shop when they have a minute. Tell them why you made a change; try to look regretful if they disapprove. Claw away at that stone wall between natural adversaries. Build trust. After a while, it's amazing how much leeway they'll give you as you try to do your job properly."

And this advice from Perlman: "An editor needs to be able to explain what the problem is and propose a solution, not just cite 'rules.' Even at papers where copy editors are not 'allowed' to ask questions or talk to reporters. If there's no time on deadline, do it the next day, or leave a note. When reporters and higher-ups see that a copy editor is paying attention to the content, and cares not just about what the (stupid) reporter got wrong but also about what the reader might not understand and carefully and logically points it out, they may listen. Every so often a light bulb goes off above someone's head and the reporter-editor gap gets a little narrower. Or some realize they're working in a place that is not intent on doing good journalism, make their peace with that or leave."

Tips for Polishing Copy

You should be the reader's advocate in improving the story. Every change you make should improve a story. If it doesn't improve the story, it's not worth your time and it's not worth the risk of introducing a mistake or disturbing the writer's flow or voice.

What's the story about? Ask what the story is about and what's the point. If you can't answer these two distinct questions, the reader surely won't know. The story may need some more work by the writer to provide a stronger focus. If you know what the story is about and what the point is, ask yourself whether the lede reflects that understanding. If not, the story may need revision.

What's the news? Ask yourself what the news is. Is it high enough in the story? If you're pulling your headline from the sixth paragraph, consider whether that should be the lede.

Beware of old news. Is the important information in the sixth graf really new? If it's not, perhaps that's exactly where it belongs. Don't reorganize a story if you haven't read previous stories on the same topic.

Try to make fun of the story. Does it contain any obvious statements that will draw a "duh!" from the reader? Does it have any awkward juxtapositions or double entendres? Sometimes it takes a dirty mind to publish a clean newspaper.

Read aloud. Read the story aloud, or at least read key parts or troublesome parts aloud. This will give you a feel for the pace, rhythm and voice of the story.

Use your computer. Use spellcheck and grammar check. Hopefully, they won't catch anything. But if they do, you'll be glad they did. There is no excuse for letting errors into the paper that even a computer could catch. And don't routinely change the things the computer catches. Make sure it's really a mistake.

Don't rely on computers. Edit as though spellcheck and grammar check were not on your computer. They can't find every spelling or grammar error. A murder trail is entirely different from a murder trial and a condom most certainly is not a condo, but they will slip past your computer.

Use your stylebook. Even if you think everything is following style, check at least a couple things as you edit, just to be sure. If one of those was wrong, check a few more. When you find a style mistake you were making, write it down somewhere to help you remember.

Use your dictionary. Look up at least one word in the dictionary each story that you edit. Even if you're sure of the spelling and pretty sure of the meaning, you might learn a slight nuance of the meaning. That may steer you to a different word. Check at least one word in the thesaurus. That also might steer you to a different word (but check that one in the dictionary, to make sure its meaning is precisely what you want).

Style and grace never trump accuracy. You may correctly determine that the writer failed in some matter of style, clarity, active voice or some other value that you hold dear. Those are all important and laudable values, and copy editors should protect those values and many more. But none of them is more important than accuracy. If you introduce an error to a story, you have done harm that outweighed any improvements you made, other than correcting other errors (and you've offset the good you did with those catches).

Tips for Writing Better Headlines

Word association. Schlander offers this advice on perhaps the most common headline-writing technique: "Think of key words and do some free association to develop angles. This is how most wordplay, good and bad, seems to develop. Good wordplay makes good use of contrast, or delightfully twists a phrase or is somehow pleasing to the ear. It's not a groaner pun, and it doesn't rely purely on alliteration. A great wordplay example from sports (and a monthly contest winner): So close, so Favre (when Brett Favre and the Packers stole a game from the Bucs). Think also of rhyming words, or words that sound like they look: gritty kitty, for example, or beep and boom. The reader can almost hear the headline."

Make fun of your headline. Does it state the obvious? Is it full of headlines? Could it have a

double meaning? Does a nearby photograph or another headline present an embarrassing juxtaposition? If you make fun of the headline yourself, chances are Jay Leno won't.

Spellcheck after you write the head. Typos happen as easily in headlines as in stories, but they're more embarrassing in large type. The reporter has the city desk, you and the slot backstopping him. You have the slot, and you know how busy she is.

Consider the tone of the story. A light, clever head on a serious story can be silly or even offensive. Yet a light, clever story demands a light, clever head.

Hold gimmicks to high standards. Effective alliteration, rhyming and puns make a memorable headline and draw readers to a story. When such techniques don't work, though, the headline becomes an embarrassment. Be demanding of such headlines. If you're not sure whether it works, it probably doesn't. If your alliteration uses four words and only three of them actually fit the story, it doesn't work. Be especially demanding of headlines using titles or lines from movies, songs or books. Be assured that you will not be the first copy editor to pen (OK, keyboard) a head on an Iowa story asking if this is heaven or on a Virginia story using "Yes, Virginia" in some fashion or on a sports salaries story demanding that someone show you the money.

Be careful with, but not afraid of, puns. Pisetzner offers this advice: "The pun must scan both ways: as a joke and literally. My favorite spot is in photo overlines. In June 1997, over a photo of an 87-year-old woman in cap and gown at a Harvard graduation -- the university's oldest grad ever -- I wrote 'No longer a senior.' Many kudos followed. What made this so effective, I think, was that the humor was sweet-natured as well as counter-stereotypical."

Be specific. The headline should tell the reader the important news. Vague headlines, even catchy vague headlines, are not informative. Decks can help here. The main head can be catchy but a bit vague if the deck is informative.

Consider photos and graphics. The headline, photo, graphic and story are a package to the reader and should be composed as such. Look at the photo and graphic to see whether they complement or contradict the head.

Punch with your verbs. Consider whether you can use a stronger, fresher or more specific verb. With your limited space, you need to make every word count, and often the verb is the most important word in the headline. Give it the attention and time it deserves. Schlander offers this advice: "A fresh verb can really make a headline. Great example: Summer muscles its way into spring. Deputies inch toward unionization. This also creates a strong mental picture. Strong, well-chosen verbs often do that."

Remember the reader. The story may be about a government body taking action, but the

reader cares most about how it affects him. Instead of "Council approves new trash contract," perhaps the headline should be "Council allows later trash pickup."

Don't plagiarize the writer's phrases. If the reporter used a clever turn of phrase in the lede or the kicker or nut graf, don't scoop the writer by putting it in the headline.

Get an early start. A headline should not be an afterthought. When you can, read the story as the reporter is writing it, so you can gain some time to think about it.

Identify your weaknesses. Know where you need to improve. Focus on one weakness each day. Tonight perhaps you will try not to be so serious on the lighter stories. Tomorrow maybe you'll work on using stronger, more active verbs. The next day you'll try to be more conversational in your headlines. You can improve your headlines better by addressing one skill at a time, rather than making a general resolution to do better.

Be possessive. Pisetzner offers this tip: "I'm not sure why, but possessives (his, their, Pope's) tend to give headlines more zing and make them sound less like 'headlines' and more like conversation. I'll choose 'Bush breaks his leg' over 'President breaks leg' every time."

Ask why. Buddenberg suggests, "For wire stories in particular, focus on why the assigning editor chose that story from among the hundreds available. That will lead you to the aspect to focus on in the head, or to the right angle (1st day, 2nd day, something in between)."

Tell someone about the story. Again from Pisetzner: "If you were to meet a friend on the street and wanted to tell him/her about the latest news you've just heard, what would you say? The two or three things you would tell your friend in your first sentence are the two or three things that should be in your headline. Is one of those details something from deep down in the story? Define that paragraph and move it higher." And, by all means, consult the writer about such a move.

Read the headline aloud. This will help you spot and avoid clunky "headlines" writing and move toward more conversational heads.

Be demanding. Buddenberg cautions: "Don't go for the hack stuff – alliteration and obvious puns and the like: On a good story it's like putting an ugly paint job on beautiful wood; on a bad story it's like an admission."

Watch for traps. Read the headline one line at a time. Does the first line, read alone, take on a funny meaning that detracts from the headline and the story? Does a nearby but perhaps unrelated photo create a juxtaposition that could make the headline offensive or ridiculous?

Recognize headline writing as an art. Again from Buddenberg: "Heads are like poetry. Hell,

they are poetry. You're a poet: You choose words that tell and find a way to fit them into given limitations."

Take a walk, or whatever. Sometimes it's helpful to step away from the screen a minute or two when you're stuck. Stretch your legs or scan the bulletin board perhaps. Pisetzner put it best: "Friends from other lives will attest to how often I, having just copyread a difficult story, will go to the men's room (after delaying nature's call the requisite hour or two) and will come out with a great headline idea. I can't explain it. But I recommend that copy editors drink plenty of liquids."

Other valuable copy editing resources

American Copy Editors Society: <http://www.copydesk.org/>

Robert Niles' Web site: <http://www.robertniles.com/>

"No Train, No Gain" copy editor materials:

<http://www.noTRAIN-nogain.com/Train/Res/CopyD/CopyD.asp>

Bill Walsh's "The Slot": <http://www.theslot.com/>

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