



A Half-Dozen Jumps on the Job

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By its nature, copy editing is a reactive craft, but anticipatory action can help a lot. Practical suggestions are below. Does your desk do these -- or want to?

1. Pre-assign each centerpiece to an individual copy editor (not only the story but the photos and graphics). That copy editor should then follow and encourage its progress toward print. If, despite these efforts, its timely realization appears uncertain, suggest or ask about a Plan B.

Rationale: Beyond the important fact that the centerpiece draws a lot of reader attention and is thus worth doing well, with its many elements the centerpiece is hardest to railroad successfully and most difficult to find a substitute for at the last minute.

2. Put the copy desk slots' names and phone numbers on department coverage budgets each day.

Rationale: The easier you make it for others to reach the right people, the more likely they are to call with something helpful.

3. As soon as a copy editor is uncertain about what's new or special in a piece of coverage, ask the person who should know -- and then get the answer into print in a way readers will appreciate.

Rationale: Which would the reporter or story editor rather have: A

question, early on, such as "I'm thinking about a headline for that piece and just want to make sure I'm on the right track, so ... ?" or a bad surprise and a recrimination session the next day?

4. As soon as a layout is designed, ascertain whether key words will fit in the largest type. If not, work with the designer. And if a change can't be made for the first edition, accomplish it for the next.

Rationale: Why should the newspaper make the reader guess what the story is about?

5. If you're the copy editor waiting for a particular story, make notes of the questions or problems you might need to address -- and start assembling the answers. Get reference sources ready, including previous stories on the topic. Think about a headline. Draft a caption.

Rationale: You'll have a better shot at being accurate AND making deadline.

6. Sustain a small pool of fresh stories, fully edited in various lengths, ready to use when, at the last minute, it turns out you have too much space or a story you shouldn't print.

Rationale: Readers (and page designers) usually prefer a nice feature to a blank space or house ad.