



Online Editing

By [Joe Marren](#)

Been keeping up with the **Associated Press Stylebook** changes lately? For instance, AP now agrees with Webster: Teenage is no longer hyphenated. Did you know that? Of course you did, you're a good copy editor.

But in these brave new media world days of online editions, how many of us are up to the challenge of editing faster than a speeding bullet? In keeping with the theories that online readers scan, not read, this tutorial is but a brief guide to online editing.

Many editors are editing print copy for print-plus Web sites (loosely called shovelware). Visit Jon Dube's site at www.cyberjournalist.net/storyforms.htm for examples, or click on my own site (www.joemarren.com) and follow the link to the Web guide. Recasting print stories for the Web isn't necessarily bad, but it doesn't take full advantage of the Web's possibilities.

OK, this is a good place to insert some philosophy. Skip this graf and the next two if you don't know how to spell transcendentalism. Here's what I mean: **Ralph Waldo Emerson's** words can still resonate on our 21st century Web sites. Emerson, writing in the giddy, manifest destiny days of the Jacksonian era, was the chief architect of the American belief of the empowered self. He claimed there was a need for a new and original American literature free of the constraints of European models. It's not too much of a stretch to apply that to online news.

We see shovelware everywhere, but we know that the new media can be liberated – and still convergent – from its print and broadcast forebears. Online sites rely on text and other techniques (slideshows, links, audio, etc.), but, just as Emerson challenged the new American writer, so should the new media be challenged to open up the promises of the Web and capture the essence of a story by using the right language and methods.

The new media should set its own agenda. Its practitioners should be the visionaries who claim the medium has not yet begun to give its full measure. When readers click on a news site they

want golden nuggets of news. Good, original reporting and editing can give them that. Engineers and experts such as **Jakob Nielsen** (www.useit.com) have done study after study showing that people don't read on the Web. They scan, usually while at work, so the narrative elements that work in print have to be tweaked for an online site.

Your job

An editor acts as an advocate for readers, listeners or viewers. It is the editor's job to think about every person who is going to read that article or watch or hear the story and make sure the reporter told it in the best possible way.

But an online site's multimedia milieu means editors have to think outside the template. Readers (or, to be more precise, scanners) can enter a story at any point in a non-linear format geared to the Web. So each link or page has to not only be able to stand on its own, but it must also add depth to the overall story. Sound complicated? It can be if an editor doesn't think about how to help users navigate through a story. A Web editor must organize information into groups and subgroups so people can quickly and easily find the text, audio, video, links or interactive elements they want. That way, a user becomes more invested in a story. As news hounds, we want them to read on, but remember that although an online site offers an endless news hole, most users seem to want bytes of news.

Traditional values

Did the above paragraph scare you? Make you want to think twice before venturing into cyber newsrooms? Fear not, there is good news. The ol' standbys that editors have depended on since the news was fit to print still count: Solid news judgment can't be replaced by bells and whistles, and we still strive for accuracy and credibility.

Now let me call in the dark clouds again. Editors feel that there are three main problems in editing online stories:

- There isn't enough time to do a good story.
- The rules seem inadequate.
- There are too many variables involved.

Timeliness

Here's where the wire service motto of "a deadline every hour" rings true. But still, don't let the competition dictate what you will write. Be accurate rather than first. Readers will trust the accurate account; they don't always care who got it first. Sure, it's best to be accurate and first, but being right is better.

Andrea Panciera, editor of www.projo.com, has a series of tips. The first two:

- Go with what you've got.
- When in doubt, go without.

The other tips can be accessed at www.cyberjournalist.net/features/panciera.htm

Sometimes companies like to release news late in the afternoon after the markets are closed. Rather than blindly putting up a news release, editors have to make sure reporters make the calls to verify information and put it in context. If they can't get hold of a source, and if it's crucial to get that comment or to clarify a point, that might mean waiting to file the story.

Rules

News happens. Sometimes, prisoners escape police custody, planes crash and trains hit school buses just as the last edited page is done. Newspaper editors instinctively, some would say automatically, know what to do on such a tight deadline. Why is an online site a different breed of cat?

Online, such stories may not go through as many editors as a print or broadcast story would, but the editor on duty must still evaluate:

- Is the information reliable? Who is the reporter talking to and is that source legitimate? No information should be posted if the source is unknown.
- Is the attribution near the top of the story? This is especially important if the information is controversial.
- Are there multiple sources? For example, if the breaking story is larger than your city, is AP covering it? If you can't get online to domestic news sites, have you checked foreign sites such as the Canadian wires or the BBC? What are they reporting?
- Is the information timely? What has your site already reported?

Once you answer those questions, how does an editor know when to put a story online? Try these guides on for size:

- When enough **accurate** information holds together. For example, your reporter is at a plane crash site and the TV crews are already showing fire trucks at the scene. Now you must determine what is the minimum requirement for posting the story. Is it when your reporter gets the flight number? The airline involved? Has an eyewitness describing the crash?
- Even if the event is not over, the story can be **complete** for the moment. In the example above, let's suppose you post a story saying a jet has crashed at Joeville Airport and you have audio of eyewitnesses describing the impact. You still have to find out the number of casualties and the airline, but it's a no-brainer to report there was a crash. Now the editor has to plan for additional coverage and site redesign as information and video becomes available.
- When the immediate impact has ended, the story is **closed**. Weeks, even days, after the plane crash it is stupid to talk to potential survivors and family members about their feelings. Rather, the larger story – the new story – may be airline safety or the inadequacies of Joeville Airport, tower personnel, etc.

Variables

This is the part editors hate.

Original online writing is a mixture of innovation and tradition. Long gray or black blocks of type are deadly. There should be MEGLO (my eyes glaze over) warning lights at such graf. Can the info be better presented in a graph, chart, or table? Can the sentences and graf be shorter? Punchier?

Adherents of tradition rightfully contend that online stories should:

- Use an inverted pyramid lede that tells the ending. ("The butler did it!")
- Stick to simple subject-verb-object sentences.
- Use active voice and action verbs ripe with connotation AND denotation. ("The market tumbled today.")
- Avoid overusing adjectives and adverbs.

Readers want to know not only who, what, when and where, but also why. Why is this story important? Editors can coach reporters to provide that as well as use links to help amplify without adding words.

Finally, original online writing can be breezier to reflect the conversational tone of a broadcast. But when to draw a line between hip and stuffy? As Fred Mann, general manager of Philadelphia Online put it:

"Does your online image reflect the image of your paper: responsible, authoritative, trustworthy? Or are you trying to be a tad cooler? Can you be both authoritative and cool? Your parents couldn't."

Web checklist

To sum up, an online editor might want to follow this advice:

- Keep in mind that Web readers scan rather than read.
- Copy should employ scannable techniques such as **bold words**, subheds, bulleted lists, and either deep links or top page links to Web sites (with the URLs at the sides, the bottom, or in the text).
- Encourage reporters to write using the inverted pyramid style.
- Remember that Journalism 101 maxim: Make sure reporters think tight and bright. Coach writers to use simple declarative sentences and to keep the adjectives to a minimum.
- Make sure reporters use the active voice and active verbs.
- Make headlines and subheds useful and self-explanatory.
- Follow the mandates of AP style as well as conventional grammar and punctuation rules.

Helpful Web sites

There are 20 sites listed below. It might as well be 20 million for all the good it will do an editor who doesn't build and update bookmarks. SPJ's Staci Kramer advises journalists not to surf on deadline but to look for Web site information off deadline, when there is time to putter around the 'puter and explore online nooks and crannies. The sites below should help discover info during what we laughingly call our "downtime."

The architecture is built around those "gotta have" reference sites and then a loosely alphabetized tips section. Don't be afraid to browse, but set a time limit per day when browsing to stay fresh.

All sites were current as of spring 2003.

References

- Acronym Finder: www.acronymfinder.com
- Have a word query? Try www.askoxford.com (This is NOT the online OED site that costs more than \$500 per year.)

- Links to dictionaries and other languages at www.dictionary.com
- The Concise Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia: www.encyclopedia.com
- Encarta Encyclopedia: www.encyclopedia.msn.com
- Guinness World Book of Records (with lots of bells and whistles) is at www.guinnessrecords.com
- Information Please Almanac (also has links to other reference works): www.infoplease.com
- Internet Public Library has links to online reference works. Also, if you have a day or so before deadline, you can e-mail online reference librarians: www.ipl.org/ref/que/pf
- Research-It offers a dictionary, thesaurus, foreign-language translator, ZIP codes, currency converter, etc. at www.itools.com/research-it
- The Journalist's Toolbox, by Mike Reilly, has links and resources to current topics, sports and teaching at www.journaliststoolbox.com/
- LibrarySpot is a mega-guide to reference works: www.libraryspot.com
- Merriam-Webster: dictionary, thesaurus, etymology guide and audio pronouncers: www.m-w.com
- Keep track of time in multiple localities at www.timeanddate.com
- A perpetual calendar is at www.vpcalendar.net

Tips

- <http://209.8.151.142/vlj.html> a Web classic maintained by John Makulowich that has tips and links on beats.
- Al Tompkins at Poynter posts a daily morning meeting full of ideas on topics du jour (www.poynter.org)
- AssignmentEditor: (charges for major sections): www.assignmenteditor.com
- Drill once through the Argus Clearinghouse (www.clearinghouse.net) by clicking on communication, then journalism and writing, then journalists, then the "toad" link. Bookmark the pages you like and you won't have to drill again.
- JournalistExpress: Bills itself as a "desktop" for journalists: www.journalistexpress.com
- PowerReporting.com arranges links by beat: www.powerreporting.com

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