



Keep in Mind

Contributed by [Anne Glover](#), St. Petersburg Times

When you're editing a story, you rightly worry about grammar, style and typos. But a whole range of issues can arise during an editor's night. Are you prepared? Here are some things to keep in mind as you edit a story.

BALANCE AND FAIRNESS Copy editors should be alert to accusations or statements that cast another person or a group of people in a bad light. Examples: Italians are all connected to the mob; Gay men are all pedophiles; Asians are all math geniuses; My neighbor is an ax murderer. These are all easy to discern as being unpublishable except in the most specialized of circumstances. But what about more subtle issues? A murder occurs and neighbors are interviewed. Someone says that the person charged has always been a troublemaker. Do you print it? Try to verify it? Or say there is a heated discussion of protection for gays and lesbians in the school district. A counterpoint is offered by the Rev. Fred Phelps, who is quoted as saying, "If we protect gays, then we'll have to start protecting people who have sex with dead people." He said it, and he's the counterpoint in the debate, right? You might ultimately end up printing both of these quotes, but it's a copy editor's job to raise the issue and see how strongly people feel about putting the accusations or characterizations in print.

NEWS VALUE. As you read through the story, ask yourself, What's the news here? If you can't easily find it, then you might have a problem. Or there might be some news, but does it rise to the level of the front page, or even inside? Just because something happened doesn't mean we always have to report it.

DIVERSITY, STEREOTYPES. Be alert for phrases or descriptions that seem rooted in stereotypes: Like many librarians, Ellen Wicker was diminutive, quiet, almost mousy in her appearance. Or, Though Renee Pridmore considers herself gay, you won't see her with short hair or wearing men's clothes. Better to describe what Renee's like than to describe a stereotype that she's not.

TASTE. The New York Times said it best: All the news that's fit to print. If something makes you go, "Whoa! Are we sure we want to print this?" it's probably a safe bet that you don't.

OVERWROUGHT PROSE. There's often a fine line between great writing and writing that could have used a more critical eye and a judicious edit. These are truly judgment calls, and sometimes even if you raise the point, your opinion is not an assigning editor's opinion. But like a pun that makes you groan, you'll know it when you see it. Be gentle, though, as you raise the issue.

BURIED LEAD. Sometimes we can get away with it. In a compelling narrative. But a reader's time is precious. If it's five or six paragraphs in, see if you can move it up.

SKEPTICISM. Does the story make claims about a product or service? Have we interviewed more than one person for the story? Is the language in the story too flowery, too full of adulation? If the story is about a study or survey, do we know the source of the information?

CLARITY. Does everything make sense? Do the numbers add up? Is the percentage right? Is the logic there? Have we answered the who, what, when, where and why?

DISSONANCE. Is the tone too light on a serious story? Does the writer use contrast to ill effect? Happy children laughed and played outside the Wee Ones Day Care Center Thursday. They played patty-cake and giggled as they ran after each other. Inside, Deborah Peters lay dead. Her throat had been slashed, to the point that she was nearly decapitated.

CLEANING UP QUOTES. Your paper probably has a policy, but sometimes you come across a quote that doesn't fit into that policy. What if it's an uneducated person talking with sincerity about their toddler who just drowned in a pool? Or a public official who suddenly uses profanity in an important quote? Or an immigrant who doesn't speak English very well? Before you automatically clean it up, raise the issue with an assigning editor.

SENSITIVITY. This can be directed toward the reader: Do they need to know every gruesome detail about a car wreck or a sexual assault? Or the subject: an innocuous description of someone's living conditions could set them up for ridicule in their community. Or to people who might have some connection to the story: relatives of crime victims might not need to see their loved one's killer described as tan and handsome in an incremental news story. In some of these cases, we will end up publishing some of these details. We find them relevant to the story. That's the key: Is it relevant?

CONTEXT. Does the story have enough background to make it understandable to a reader who is coming to the story for the first time? Incremental stories can assume that people have been following a situation. A quick background paragraph can fill the reader in unobtrusively.

COMPATIBILITY. This usually involves graphics or photographs that go with a story. Do the photos match the story? If a mug shot is running, is it the right one? Is the photo of another teacher who didn't do anything wrong running with a story about a teacher who is accused of wrongdoing?

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