



Good Editing Will Maintain The Credibility of Newspapers

By [Kenn Finkel](#)

I. How to edit.

- A. Read a story from top to bottom, as though your hands were tied behind you.
- B. Work on the story:
 1. Challenge everything, with the idea of making it better.
 - a. The lead.
 1. Silly premises.
 2. Good stuff that is often buried.
 3. Single-word stoppers.
 - b. Other than the lead.
 1. Attribution problems.
 2. Potential bad taste.
 2. Reporting holes in stories.
 - a. Unanswered questions.
 - b. Invalid premises that lead to unsupported conclusions.
 - c. Statements from news sources that just don't ring true.
 - d. Issues raised in the lead that leave readers wondering.
 - e. Anything involving numbers.
 - f. Historic facts and quotations.
 3. Vague references and other jargon that reporters and editors use as shorthand for each other but could force readers to blink.
 4. Improving the way a story reads.
 - a. Moving a few words.

- b. Rewriting sentences.
 - c. Poor parenthetical placement.
 - 5. GSPS (grammar, spelling, punctuation, style).
 - 6. Clutter.
 - a. Simple wordiness.
 - b. Too many ideas in one sentence.
 - c. Quotes as clutter.
 - 7. Redundancy
 - a. Simple.
 - b. In context.
 - 8. Excess and misused adjectives and adverbs.
 - 9. Misused words and concepts.
 - a. Common misconceptions.
 - b. Constructions that are pure nonsense by definition.
 - c. Misuse of sense verbs.
 - d. False synonyms.
 - e. Synonymymania (simple as well as T*A*N).
 - 10. Clichés, tired constructions and other crutches (gimmick leads, catchy film titles, advertising slogans, etc.).
 - 11. Technical duties of the editor (typesetting, graphics and pagination).
- C. Read the story from top to bottom again, re-tooling and refining.

II. How not to edit

- A. Don't try to make every story read as though you wrote it.
- B. Don't edit by absolutes:
 - 1. Trying to remove every adverb and adjective.
 - 2. Trying to limit every sentence to a specific word count.
 - 3. Other absolutes.
- C. Don't assume that the reader knows:
 - 1. Everything.
 - 2. Nothing.
- D. Don't assume that the author knows:
 - 1. Nothing.

2. Everything.

III. Especially for sports copy editors.

- A. Be careful with numbers. Sports stories tend to be full of them, and, as an editor, you should start by assuming that most of them are wrong. Have an icon on your computer desktop that points directly to the calculate function, or keep a small, inexpensive plastic calculator with your work materials so that you can recheck computations of numbers that appear in stories.
- B. Numbers that can't be checked by calculating can usually be looked up somewhere (batting averages, team winning percentages, earned-run averages, years that events were supposed to have taken place, etc.). It's a good idea to assume that a lot of these are wrong in stories, so you should have at your fingertips several sources that you know to be reliable.
- C. Use caution when depending on the Internet. A lot of information out there is reliable and worth using. A lot of it is not. Get comfortable with it and learn which Internet sources can be relied on.
- D. Watch for inconsistencies and lazy reporting. If a story talks about the significance of the Braves' move from Milwaukee to Atlanta, or the Athletics' move from Kansas City to Oakland, or the Rams' move from Los Angeles to St. Louis, then be sure that doesn't call for a reference to an earlier move of the Braves from Boston to Milwaukee, or the Athletics from Philadelphia to Kansas City or the Rams from Cleveland to Los Angeles.
- E. Be sure that stories involving rankings, special awards, players of the month, most valuable participants, rookies of the year, etc., always let the reader know who voted in the selection process.
- F. Be careful of unattributed pejorative quotes. It's easy to let the author of a story get away with quoting an unidentified teammate as saying that a named player is lazy or that the owner is a cheapskate — or an unidentified general manager or coach as saying that another (named) general manager or coach is a liar. Unattributed pejorative quotes are rarely

allowed in other sections of the paper. Why should sports sections tolerate them? Challenge these things in the interest of maintaining the credibility of your newspaper and lifting you above the sludge provided by television.

- G. Keep a close watch on reporting that quotes losing coaches or players who berate the game officials. Ninety-five percent of those quotes are useless. Rarely do officials play a part in who wins and who loses. Blaming officials is the first crutch that losers rely on. On those very rare situations in which an official's call might have affected the outcome, be sure that reporters have made an effort to get reactions from the officials involved or the supervisors of those officials — as well as representatives of the opposing team. Limiting sports story references to those one or two times a year that officiating might have played a part in the outcome will raise the credibility of the newspaper.

IV. **Qualities of an editor** (adapted from Newsman's English, by Harold Evans).

- The human-interest qualities of sympathy, insight, breadth of view, imagination, sense of humor.
- An orderly and well-balanced mind, which implies judgment, sense of perspective and proportion.
- A cool head, ability to work in an atmosphere of hurry and excitement without becoming flustered or incapable of accurate work.
- Quickness of thought, coupled with accuracy.
- Conscientiousness, keenness and ruthlessness, rightly directed.
- Judgment, based on well-informed common sense.
- A capacity for absorbing fact — and fancy — and expressing them in an acceptable manner.
- Adaptability — the power (whatever your feelings) of seeing things from the reader's point of view.
- Knowledge of the main principles of the laws of libel, contempt and copyright.
- Physical fitness for a trying, sedentary life that takes a toll of nerves, sight and digestion.
- Team spirit — a newspaper is one of the more striking products of

cooperative enterprise and effort.

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