



Coaching Tips/Checklist

'The best editors have the eye of an eagle, the touch of a butterfly, and are completely without ego. There aren't many of them around.'

-- I'm not sure who said this, but it's a damned good quote.

[Kevin Cavanagh](#)

Week 1: Editing local copy

To keep staff-written copy clear, error-free and legally safe, editors should be able to:

- * Spot errors in spelling, grammar, and style.
- * Make sure the story would be clear to your spouse or friend or mother. If a question occurs to you, make sure the story answers it before you send it on.
- * Detect potential libel, or common danger areas.

Tips

* After reading a story, ask yourself: Is the focus clear? Are the lead and focus backed up in the story?

Make sure you can answer these questions.

* Sharpen the focus. Make sure the point is clear or clearly alluded to by the 5th graph, and certainly before story jumps to another page.

* As you edit, read out loud every sentence in which a change is made, to make sure it works and that a new structural problem wasn't created by the edit.

* Interpret jargon or journalese. Cut out needless words. Change long and complicated words to short and clear ones without endangering accuracy.

* Trim fat quotes to make them better. Kill or paraphrase long-winded quotes that let stories drift and readers wander. Quotes that are dull or laced with jargon do a story more harm than good.

* Legal flags: Even if you're not sure what it is, alert a senior editor if you sense a legal problem. A hundred false alarms are better than a bad one that got through.

* A good habit: Start each shift with a 5-minute review of your style guide.

Typical items on an editor's basic accuracy checklist:

spelling

numbers and math

locations / geography
names and titles
attribution
dates / time references

Week 2: Editing the wire

To effectively edit newswire copy, editors should be able to

- * Trim long stories or make briefs by carefully compressing text to retain key elements, rather than just cutting from the bottom. Late in a story there can be first mentions of key points.
- * Eliminate repetition and unnecessary attribution.
- * Do away with clutter and jargon.
- * See and change non-Canadian or non-regional orientation.

Tips:

- * To condense text and avoid lopping off second halves, be on the lookout for long quotes that can be reduced or paraphrased, weak quotes that can be dropped, or redundant passages and comments the story can simply do without.
- * Except when deadline prohibits, read the full story before editing it for length. Stay in the habit of scanning the complete story on your first read-through, before editing. This drill sharpens your ability to speed-read large chunks of copy. When time is tight, that's an invaluable copy editing skill to have.
- * Again, interpret jargon or journalese. Taking care not to endanger accuracy, change long and complicated words to clear, intelligent ones. Wire copy, especially in sports and entertainment, can be prone to tired clichés. Replace with straight talk.
- * Cut clutter. Wire copy can be notorious for repeating passages of wordy official statements and releases. Without stopping to do major rewrites, always be ready to clip needless words out of sentences. Clarify the story and help the reader.
- * Remember where your readers live. Make the changes that ensure sure terms of reference - locations, directions, currency, land areas, even words like "lorry" - make sense locally. Be especially wary of this in copy of non-Canadian origin.

Week 3: Headlines, cutlines, decks

The goal is to write clear and strong heads, decks, cutlines that don't overlap. To get there, editors should be able to:

- * Sense and coordinate the efforts of the different elements.
- * Be familiar with Spectator guidelines for the various devices.

- * Be able to write consistently clear headlines that are sometimes clever, always informative and enticing.

Tips:

- * Keep in mind that heads, decks, captions and even pull-quotes should each bring new information to the package.
- * Above all, headlines should strive for clarity and accuracy. Don't steal the lead or a story's punchline. Use strong, active words.
- * Simple is best: Don't try to say too many things in a head.
- * Help yourself: Jot down four or five key words while editing the story. They'll act as prompts, and ignite ideas when you're writing the headline.
- * Help yourself: One way to come up with catchy word plays for features is to start with the central subject word, then write down any phrases or themes that use the same word. One or more may be good heads (i.e., 'Skirting the issue' for a fashion spread, or 'Clear thinking on sunglasses', or a landscaping piece headlined 'Life in the bush leagues').
- * Help yourself: Regularly read the guidelines for heads and cutlines.

Week 4: The importance of proofing

The goal is to catch errors in edited copy as well as in components (headlines, captions) that the copy editor wrote.

Editors must find ways to stay on top of:

- * The first-degree killers: typos in heads, cutlines and leads; or stories that don't end because their last lines got bumped off the page and into outer space. (This drives readers nuts.)
- * Names, for consistent spelling and for use of full name and title.
- * Numbers, for being accurate and making sense.
- * Calendars and event listings.

Tips:

- * Help yourself: Based on your own strengths and blind spots, devise a checklist to ensure all content components get an itemized examination before being sent back to the slot. All of us benefit from such memory aids. Use it as routinely as writers use story outlines.
- * Double-check the spelling of every name in a cutline. Always.
- * Check with the reporter if you sense that ages or salaries or budgets or tender bids seem unlikely.
- * Make sure percentages don't add up to more than 100, that a keystroke didn't turn millions into billions, a missing zero in a headline doesn't turn \$750,000 into \$75,000.
- * Make sure the whole story is there, that a late editing change didn't bump the end of a story off the page. Do this check often: after every editing change, and once again before sending

the work back to slot.

- * Double-check all jumps, to make sure readers are being sent to the correct page.

- * Don't rely on other departments: always check folio lines for correct date and page number.

- * Event calendars are an act of faith, but as a bare minimum for readers, check for duplicate listings, events that have already occurred, faulty dates (i.e. "Monday May 12", when in fact Monday is the 11th), or listings with no location or contact number.

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