



## How to Get, Prepare for and Make the Most of Copy-Editing Internships

Compiled from the contributions of Vince Rinehart, Autumn Brewington, Martha Wright, Anne Glover, Bill Walsh and Andy Parsons.

### **Applying: The Ins and Outs**

In general, start early. Newspapers look for people who've been heavily involved in journalism at the high school level. When you get to college, volunteer in your freshman year. Out of pure necessity, you'll learn about writing, editing, design, production—and that can lead to internships in fields other than reporting.

**When:** ASAP. Waiting until junior year to seek an internship is too late. Don't apply only to big metro dailies; many smaller publications offer valuable experience. See what assistance your school offers in finding a paid internship (or, one that offers credit). Talk to your hometown paper, and be willing to volunteer there. Also, apply early in the semester: Many papers have a summer-internship deadline of Nov. 1.

**How:** With care. If you're applying for a copy-editing internship, no matter how good you are, have somebody else—the more eyes the better—proof your application. There's little more damaging to an editor's prospects than a résumé, essay or cover letter with typos or grammatical errors.

**What:** Take advantage of job fairs, recruiter visits to campus and journalism conferences. These are excellent places to meet prospective employees and/or mentors, as well as a chance to hone your interviewing skills and learn what employers are looking for. Check campus bulletin boards and Web sites for information.

**Where:** For information about paid internships, check out [www.asne.org](http://www.asne.org) and <http://djnewspaperfund.dowjones.com/fund/default.asp>.

## **Before Your First Day ...**

**Map it:** Learn about the area where you'll be working. Get online or go to the library and study up on the geography, economy or history of the area. Buy a map; learn place names. If you get a chance to visit before work starts, take the opportunity to explore the area.

**Read it:** Read the paper. Read the paper. Read the paper as much as you can, online or otherwise, and pay particular attention to headlines and other display type. Ask what stylebook the paper uses, and become familiar with it. If the paper has its own proprietary stylebook or style guides, ask whether you can get a copy in advance. Some papers may have an e-mailable stylebook, as the Washington Post has.

\*Ask whether the desk you're going to be working for has any other references you might need, such as a desk procedures guide.

**Learn it:** Seek training on how to do your job before your first day, and don't assume the newspaper's orientation and computer training process will take copy editing into consideration. Ask necessary questions, such as where to write a headline; how to save; how to spell check; how to measure a story; and how to cut text in a notes function, so you can restore it later if more space is available. Also, ask about what sorts of things are out of bounds: Do you need to check with assignment editors and reporters before changing ledes? Are you expected to send stories back to the assignment editor if more than, say, 10 inches needs to be cut?

## **So You Want to Flourish, Huh?**

-- Act professionally (and dress that way, too). Don't tell co-workers X-rated tales about your weekend adventures. If you have a Web site or an online diary or journal, consider it part of your public presence. Watch what you have out there for your colleagues to read; they will.

-- Don't be afraid to ask questions, but before you ask, make sure you've already sought possible answers elsewhere—in the dictionary, stylebook, archives or other online resources, for matters of language and usage, for

example. Asking questions takes time that supervisors and desk veterans often don't have much of, but when in doubt, ask. The consequences of assuming something can be painful. This also applies to raising content questions with reporters or their editors.

-- Find a role model or mentor in your department. Your paper may assign you a professional partner from another desk, and that's fine for many facets of life at the paper. But find a buddy who can tell you about life on your desk and fill in gaps about unwritten rules.

-- Write things down. Get a pen, Palm, tattoo needle—whatever you need. Writing helps you remember things, and it can pay off in other ways. A former Post intern recalls: "Writing down what people tell you shows that you respect them and think their advice is important. Which means they'll be eager to tell you more."

-- Familiarize yourself with all of your surroundings. One former Post intern, during her summer on the Metro copy desk, systematically drove around the Beltway, getting off at every exit to poke around. She learned things in the process that a lot of full-time editors wouldn't have known. If you're reading a lot of basketball stories, go to a game and observe the players in action. Don't forget to become familiar with your co-workers, too. Make a seating chart if it helps you remember people's names. You don't want to interrupt slots on deadline to ask them who editors are or where to find a reporter.

-- If you have downtime, use it wisely. You may see veteran copy editors engaged in instant messaging or Web surfing. It's not a luxury you can afford; it really isn't for them, either. Productive ways to spend free minutes include looking at stories as they reach a respected veteran on the rim and then looking at the stories as sent to slot. Note the differences after slotting. Read the stylebook. Look at pages, if you can, and read beyond the stories you handled. If you want to be a hero, catch something that got by your slot editor in time to get it fixed for that edition.

-- Seek feedback! Don't just wait for it. Ask to watch your supervisor go over your work, if he or she doesn't offer. And bring that notebook along. If your headline is changed, ask why, if you aren't being told (Ask tactfully;

“hey, why’d you change that?” can be misinterpreted.). When you send a headline to the slot, send a message or stand up and tell him or her, “If that head doesn’t work for you, can I have another crack at it?” If regular evaluations aren’t part of the process, ask your supervisor for something written or a conversation.

-- Don’t stop thinking about headlines or editing after first edition. If your headline gets rewritten, think about whether you could improve on the slot’s improvement. If there is time, chat about the headline or a difficult sentence or graf, or say, “What if we tried this?”

-- Work at your headlines. Your ability to write solid news headlines will set you apart. Study headlines in good papers. Study the different ways they summarize stories, and see why some heads tell the what and others the why. See that they not only tell the main point of the story but pack a lot of information in a few words and convey why the story is in that day’s paper. Take chances with feature headlines. Go beyond easy puns and alliteration—display your wit.

-- Review your work. Check out how your stories changed after you sent them on. Pull clips every day.

-- To whatever extent time and your workload permit, scan the whole paper when the first edition reaches the newsroom. Maybe you’ll be the person who catches an error in another section. You can be a hero for spotting a mistake or a typo in display type; it may also help you look knowledgeable the next day about what’s in print.

-- Branch out, both in and out of the newsroom. Introduce yourself to people beyond the desk. If someone wrote or did something you particularly admired, tell that person. An honest compliment feels good coming from an intern, too. Don’t forget to get a real life outside of work. Otherwise, it becomes all about work and you fall into thinking that your happiness rises or falls on what goes on there. Try to meet people from other professions who can help give you perspective about what they do or go through on a daily basis.

-- Your focus should be on your work, or your level of work. Face it—you don't know everything, so being humble, seeking appropriate feedback and keeping your focus on what you can control is the best course of action. Too often, a lot of energy is wasted worrying about what others are doing or whether they're getting ahead.

-- If you're interested in something else besides editing—layout, reporting, photography—ask whether it's possible to shadow people who do those jobs. Be willing to do it on your own time, of course. Remember, this time is for you to enhance your skills. Interested in writing? Come up with an idea and pitch it to your supervisor.

-- Enjoy and get to know your co-workers. There are levels to an internship: one would be learning about editing, another would be learning about life and managing a career, or in some cases, how not to.

-- Learn who has what area of expertise, and don't be afraid to tap that expertise with a question or two if it helps you edit a story on that topic. If you have your own area of expertise, don't be afraid to use it in raising a question or making a comment on a story you may not have handled.

-- Volunteer. (Anne Glover of the St. Petersburg Times says utility players are worth their weight in gold. "Volunteer like mad for anything that looks like it will broaden your knowledge.") Is there a story or some task no one else wants to handle: a dense graphic, the caption and head for the Pet of the Week photo, some mundane calendar or compilation of police briefs? Dig into it; try to do it better than it's been done. "If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right" is an attitude supervisors love to see.

-- If you've done more than editing, make sure people know about it. Familiarity with, for example, Quark Xpress helped one Fort Lauderdale intern design pages when her paper's pagination system crashed and the backup system was needed.

-- Try to take charge of your career, but do it in a way that's not clingy or obnoxious. Don't get mad or upset if you don't get weekend days off right away or if you don't get to work on the section you most covet. Seek some

consistent feedback about how to get there, but be a realist and know that you'll have to wait your turn. If you're talented, you'll get some opportunities; then make the most of them. If you're not, you'll get the message soon enough.

-- Is it a tough summer? Are you not getting enough to do, or maybe too much? Too little that's interesting or challenging? Are supervisors criticizing your work? Did you get chewed out by a reporter or assigning editor over an editing change or a headline? Even a really disappointing summer can teach you something—about handling adversity or criticism, or what not to do in the future, or how you'll treat people if you ever become a manager.

### **Afterward, Not Afterthoughts**

1. Keep in touch! The people you meet can be valuable to your future even if you never return to that publication. Ours is a small world—there are only about two degrees of separation between everybody. Remember when you apply for jobs that the people with hiring power will usually know people on the papers you worked for. Let your supervisors and colleagues know what you're doing, and never underestimate the lasting power of a thank-you note to anyone who helped you.

2. If you're still in school, use your winter and spring breaks wisely. Ask the paper you worked for whether they might need help during your time off; it could be a godsend at times of year when lots of full-time employees want to take vacation, and it's just another chance for you to shine.

3. If you're good at what you do, in your supervisors' eyes, and you like the paper you're working for, you might parlay your internship into something more permanent. Two-year internships are becoming a bigger part of the job landscape, and they can end early if you work hard and are good at it. It's okay for your reach to occasionally exceed your grasp; don't be afraid to ask for a full-time job, even if the paper has a preference for veterans.

### **Things to Remember:**

There is no job from which you can't learn something.

How you pitch an idea is as important as what the idea is.

You have the potential to know the stylebook better than full-timers; use it.

Write things down, including your mistakes.

People don't like telling you stuff more than once.

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