

Copy Editing

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Copy-editing is the art/skill of improving content by making it accurate, concise and comprehensible. Ideally, copy-editing is NOT rewriting. Writers should still recognize the work as their own. The most experienced copy editors operate like the Woody Allen protagonist and human chameleon Zelig: they try to edit their stable of reporters as individuals, ensuring that each one's writing style is preserved. The greatest compliment for a copy editor is a reporter who is unable to tell what has been added to his story.

That said, the goal isn't to please the reporter but to inform readers with the facts AND the right context of the story. Most copy suffers from misleading rather than overtly inaccurate information. For instance, a recently submitted article quoted Republicans blaming the current White House for the stringent education policy better known as No Child Left Behind. The student reporter was too young to realize that George W. Bush, not Barack Obama, had formulated the law. Technically, her article didn't include any actual factual errors – her quotes were accurate – but one of the story's overall points was misleading. How are such goals achieved?

- Reading the content from top to bottom BEFORE starting to edit. Sometimes instead of needing to recraft the “lede,” the editor might find it “buried” lower in the story.
- Communicating with writers directly about their copy to ascertain the main points they hoped to convey along with the desired context and tone. Sometimes, writers can “say” what they mean but stumble when they try to write it.

Here are more specific tips from Don Hecker, a *New York Times* editor who not only oversees copy editors and assists in hiring them but also works with college journalism students. He gathered this advice from other *Times* editors.

The New York Times

Six Things to Consider in Any Article or Column

1) Does the first paragraph, or “lede,” work?

- Is it clear and easy to understand? If it's a hard-news story, ask yourself if you could write a headline based solely on the lede. If not, why not?
- Has the writer tried to put everything in the first paragraph (or worse, the first sentence)? Look for facts you could take out of the lede and use further down.

2) Are all the basics there?

- Who? What? Where? When? How? Are they all there? The simplest things are always the easiest to forget!
- Is a comparison with something the reader knows, a baseline, required to help understand magnitude (the ever-popular football field, or averages or records)?
- Is there enough history or background to make the story clear to the reader who has not been following the story?

3) Are there unanswered questions?

- Does the story say what's going to happen next? What are the implications?
- If obvious questions can't be answered, does the story say why?

4) Is it fair and balanced?

- When an explicit or implicit accusation is raised, does the target have an opportunity to respond?
- Are racial, sexual, religious or ethnic references relevant? Is that relevance clearly established in the story? Is it applied equally to all people in the story?
- Is there "another side" to the story or to the contentions of the main sources? Is that other side, or sides, presented and is it given appropriate weight?
- Is the subject matter of the story placed in context by including information from an outside or unbiased observer?

5) How well is the piece written?

- Is information where the reader wants to find it, or are important details left to the end, or too much detail thrown at the reader at the beginning?
- Does the writer fall back on jargon or insider terms or frequent use of acronyms or initials for things or processes?
- Where a term that may not be familiar to all readers is used, can the writer define it gracefully without insulting readers who do know what it means?

6) Do the numbers add up?

- Does the math work?
- If an overall number is given, do the details of the story support that number?

Three Steps for Editors

Three steps can make you a good editor. But like all steps, you have to take them in order.

FIRST, find the typos. A typo is any mistake in writing that does not prevent the reader from knowing what was really meant. Mostly it's misspelling or missing or duplicated words. But it's the kind of mistake that every single reader can identify. And that means every single reader will have a little less confidence in the story.

SECOND, know your grammar and style. When you learn a new language, you spend a lot of time memorizing rules. To be a good editor, you have to do that with English. Not every reader knows when a rule of grammar has been broken, but the well-informed ones do. When a grammatical error gets through, the writer and the editor both look less competent in the eyes of knowledgeable people. And that's not good.

Style is the set of rules of any publication that makes every article consistent in things like capitalization, abbreviations and punctuation. You just have to memorize that, too. Even many intelligent readers may not be able to say when you have violated a style rule. But just below their level of consciousness, those intelligent readers will recognize the inconsistency, and that makes them value your publication less.

THIRD, use your brain. Every story is a puzzle, a mystery, a treasure hunt. Hiding someplace in it there may be something wrong, and it is the editor's job to find it. That's the intellectual challenge of editing — to see further than the person who wrote the article you are editing. There are guidelines and checklists that help make good editors, but in the end, it's intelligence that makes great editors.

Tips for Proofing

- On deadline, check at least the first and the last graph — that's where a lot of mistakes hide.
- Conjunctions and articles are the words most commonly duplicated in type. They are also the words most commonly misspelled (“an” for “and,” for example)
- One of the most common mistakes writers make is to leave a word out. Look especially for such omitted words.
- Errors often happen together. If you find one, keep your eye open for another nearby.
- It never hurts to fact-check names when there's time. (Should that first name be “Alan,” “Allan,” “Allen,” or “Allyn”?) But if you look on the Web, be sure to use official sites (like .gov sites) or recognized authorities (like Britannica Online). When time is at a premium, rely upon that instinct that says, “Check it!”
- If you are operating in a program that has a spell checker, use it. If it provides a list of misspelled words, check to see that a name or place is not spelled two (or more!) different ways.
- Still don't completely trust spelling checkers. In particular, be aware of homophone confusion: complement and compliment, accept and except, effect and affect, oversees and overseas.
- Use your second language if you have one. For example, if you know French and see a name like Pierre Lacroix, you know that chances are that last "e" shouldn't be there.
- Know your limitations. There will be some things you will just never remember correctly. You'll soon know what they are. Look those things up, every time.
- Just read the material. Forget worrying about editing, usage, and style. Just read through it like an ordinary reader.
- Don't add a mistake when you're trying to correct a mistake! Typing missteps when trying to correct a misspelling or other obvious error are among the most common causes of typos.

These tips are adapted from Patrick LaForge, who runs the *Times*' copy editing desk.

- Read the copy out loud. Read it silently, one word at a time. Read it backward and focus on the spelling of words. Print a copy. Preview it in a different application. Change the format or the screen resolution. Justify or unjustify the type. Take a break and return to it with fresh eyes.
- Beware of contractions and apostrophes: their and they're, its and it's, your and you're.
- Beware of doubled words at the end and start of a line. A doubled “that” will often slip right by if you let it.

- Double-check proper names and claims of distinction (first, best, oldest, tallest, etc.).
- Double-check little words that are often interchanged: or, of; it, is.
- Check all the numbers, especially any reference to millions, billions or trillions. Do the math. Do the math again.
- Be aware of dates and days of the week, especially in advance copy or copy that has been held. Be aware of references to next month/last month around the time the month is changing.
- Make a personal checklist of the things you tend to miss. Use it on every story.
- Memorize frequently misspelled and misused words. Here's a list: www.yourdictionary.com/library/misspelled.html.
- After reading for content and spelling, proofread separately for punctuation.