

# THE ART OF EDITING

FOURTH EDITION

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# *Editing*

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# *The Art of Editing*

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# *Preface*

It is with great pleasure that we present to you the Fourth Edition of *The Art of Editing*, a text that in its first three editions met with widespread acceptance and approval. We think there is good reason for that success: It is the most comprehensive and up-to-date text in its field.

In this edition, as in the earlier ones, we have attempted to explain how editors do their jobs. Because no two editors work alike, or edit in exactly the same way, writing an editing text is difficult and challenging. We have attempted to deal with the problem by using examples of how good editors have edited a story. It is important to recognize that these examples are but *one* way to edit a story. There may be many other ways. In editing, there is often no absolute, no *right* and *wrong*. We have sought the advice of many editors in constructing our examples. If editing is an art, as we believe, then we have gone to the artists to see how it is done.

The editors who have helped us with these examples are too numerous to mention. We have taken examples, both good and bad, from newspapers from coast to coast. Through these examples, we learn how to edit and how not to edit. We learn how to write headlines and how not to write headlines. We learn how to design pages and how not to design pages. But through it all, we learn. There is no end to the process of education in daily journalism.

Journalism is an interesting, exciting and stimulating profession. Editing is a vital and important part of journalism, both print and broadcast. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television wouldn't be nearly as good without editors as they are with editors;

they can be superb with top-flight editors. We hope this book inspires some to consider editing as a career.

Much of the text is intended as preparation for the prospective newspaper copy editor, the pathway into editing chosen by most students; but the basics of editing apply to magazine and broadcast editors as well. Most of the techniques are the same, and the excitement is universal.

Still, it is difficult for any book to capture the excitement of the copy desk because the beginner first must master the intricacies of the editor's art. Attention to detail is of primary importance at the copy desk, and we believe this book attends to that detail more thoroughly than any other. We hope we have done so as interestingly as possible.

This edition has one significant change in format compared to the earlier ones. It is written in wire-service style, which is used by most newspapers in the United States. Because students are expected to write and edit in this style, we believe it makes sense to use it in their text. Numerous other improvements have been made from cover to cover.

We are indebted to our colleagues, students and editors who read chapters and offered many helpful suggestions. Special gratitude is extended to Dale Spencer, an attorney and teacher whose advice was invaluable in updating the chapter on press law; Mackie Morris, a teacher and broadcaster who prepared most of the chapter on broadcast editing; and Barbara Luebke, who wrote the section on stereotyping in Chapter 7.

We hope this edition is prepared with the same high standards set by our colleague, Floyd K. Baskette, who died in 1979. His name remains on the title page of this edition because his work is of enduring quality, and much of it remains from the first two editions.

We have changed and updated, but one old axiom holds true: Editing is an art no matter where or by whom it is practiced. To those who will accept the challenge of careful editing, this volume is dedicated.

*Columbia, Missouri*  
*Evanston, Illinois*

B.S.B.  
J.Z.S.

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*PART I*

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*The Copy Editor  
in Perspective*



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# *The Editor*

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## **The State of Editing**

Columnist James J. Kilpatrick, one of the great newspaper writers of our time, laments the demise of editing quality in newspapers. He writes:

To read almost any American daily today is to conclude that copy editors have vanished as completely from our city rooms as the ivory-billed woodpecker has vanished from the southern woodlands. We appear to have reared a generation of young reporters whose mastery of spelling, to put the matter mildly, is something less than nil. . . . Once there was a white-haired geezer in an eye shade to intercept a reporter's copy, and to explain gently but firmly to the author that *phase* and *faze* are different words, and that *affect* and *effect* ought not to be confused. The old geezer has gone, and literacy with him.<sup>1</sup>

Kilpatrick's fond memories of the good old days probably are enhanced by the passage of time. The fact is that newspapers always have made errors, and the newspapers edited by crotchety old copy editors wearing green eye shades were no exception. Still, few would disagree with Kilpatrick that language skills in general have deteriorated. Newspapers, without a doubt, have been affected.

Too many reporters and editors at today's newspapers are products of an educational system with misguided priorities. There was a time not so long ago when it was fashionable to consider pho-

1. James J. Kilpatrick, "Doesn't Anyone Edit Copy Anymore?" *Washington Journalism Review*, October 1984, p. 44.

netic spelling adequate. Rote memorization of spelling words was a waste of time, educational trendsetters told us. Grammar was viewed as an exercise in nit-picking. The consequences of that abandonment of the basics is commonly acknowledged today as one of the great tragedies of modern education. Now, a back-to-basics movement has swept the country, and there is evidence that teachers in today's elementary and secondary schools—some of whom were victims of the errors of the past—are at least attempting to emphasize language skills. Unfortunately, that won't help those who failed to learn, including many reporters and editors now on the job.

Kilpatrick writes:

Let us contend, in sweet charity and self-defense, that virtually all of [the mistakes in newspapers are] a consequence not of ignorance but of the carelessness that walks with a wandering mind. If that is the best we can say, what have we said? Not much. I know that newspapers operate under the terrible pressure of deadlines. That fact . . . may help to explain, but it provides a feeble excuse.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1-1** Columnist James J. Kilpatrick is convinced that the copy editors of today are not as good as those of earlier generations.

Another feeble excuse for mistakes is offered by broadcasters who say, "Grammar isn't important in radio or television. Spoken English and written English are different." That may be true, but should it be? Clearly, the answer is no. The generations that have grown up with television unfortunately don't even blink when broadcasters read on the air, "The City Council voted today to raise *their* salaries to \$15,000 a year." Such mistakes in the use of pronouns are so common that many people don't even notice. Nor do they notice when a newspaper advertisement reads, "This group of pearls *are* specially selected by our buyers." Nor when words are misspelled as in *occassions*, *accidently*, *wintery* and *accomodate*.

2. Ibid., p. 47.

Fortunately, many people *do* notice, so perhaps there is hope.

Journalism, whether print or broadcast, is a profession that demands a mastery of language skills. Words, not cameras or microphones or video display terminals, are the primary tools of the trade. As in any craft, mastering the use of those tools is essential to success. Good editors know that, and they value highly those who possess those skills. This book is designed to help.

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## The Editor's Duties

Every editor edits. That is, every editor determines to some extent what will and will not be published or broadcast. Usually, those decisions are based on that editor's perception of the mission and philosophy of the publication or broadcast station.

This book emphasizes the skills of editing, but learning those skills without a thorough understanding of the philosophy of editing would be like learning to hit a baseball without knowing why hitting is important. Why bother to hit if you don't know to run to first base? In editing, it is important to know not only *when* a change in copy should be made but also *why* that change should be made.

Good editing depends on the exercise of good judgment. For that reason it is an art, not a science. To be sure, in some aspects of editing—accuracy, grammar and spelling, for example—there are only right and wrong answers, as often is the case in science. But editing also involves discretion: knowing when to use which word, when to change a word or two for clarity and when to leave a passage as the writer has written it. Often, the best editing decisions are those in which no change is made. Making the right decisions in such cases is clearly an art.

The editing skills taught herein will be those used at newspapers in general and at newspaper copy desks in particular. Those same skills, however, apply directly to magazine and broadcast editing. Editing for those media differs slightly from newspaper editing because of special requirements, so separate chapters to highlight those differences are included in this book. Still, the skills required of all editors are much the same as those required of newspaper copy editors, the valuable members of a newspaper's staff who have the final crack at copy before it appears in print. Copy editors, it has been said, are the last line of defense before a newspaper goes to press. As such, they are considered indispensable by top editors but remain anonymous to the public. Unlike the names of reporters, who frequently receive bylines, copy editors' names seldom appear in print.

Some believe that absence of recognition accounts for the scarcity of journalism graduates who profess interest in copy desk work. Editing, it is said, isn't as glamorous or as exciting as reporting. But those who view desk work as boring clearly have never experienced it. To the desk come the major news stories of the

day—the space walk, the eruption of a volcano, the election of a president, the rescue of a lost child. The desk is the heart of the newspaper, and it throbs with all the news from near and far. Someone must shape that news, size it, display it and send it to the reader.

The copy editor is a diamond cutter who refines and polishes, removes the flaws and shapes the stone into a gem. The editor searches for flaws and inaccuracies, and prunes the useless, the unnecessary qualifiers and the redundancies. The editor adds movement to the story by substituting active verbs for passive ones, specifics for generalities. The editor keeps sentences short so that readers can grasp one idea at a time and still not suffer from writing that reads like a first-grade text.

Editing is creative work, too. Editors at many newspapers have opportunities to do page layout, and few newspaper jobs require more creativity than that.

Ah, but editing isn't as much fun as writing, some say. Why learn editing skills if you want to write? Columnist Kilpatrick knows. Although considered one of the great writers of our time, he bemoans the demise of *editing* skills. Good writers know that good editing can make their prose even better. Good writers know that good editors can save them great embarrassment. They also know that editing skills complement writing skills. Editing the work of others helps you learn to avoid their mistakes when you write. Editing also helps you learn the importance of clarity. Often, what is clear to the writer isn't clear at all to the editor—or to the reader. There also is this reality: Almost everyone who enters newspaper, magazine or broadcast work eventually will do some editing.

So, there is general agreement among the enlightened that editing is important. But there is less agreement about just what an editor is supposed to do. Kenn Finkel of the *Dallas Times Herald* tried to outline the duties of an editor at a workshop on editing skills:

The editor is the conscience of the writer and the newspaper. He does his job when he challenges. He should approach every story with a challenge to see if it meets the newspaper's standards. It is his duty to help every story he edits.

The editor should, when time allows, read a story from top to bottom before making changes. It is important to understand all of what the writer is trying to say.

Having read the story through, the editor can remove words, correct grammar, smooth sentence flow and do other things that make a story more pleasing to the reader.

The editor must make sure that all questions are answered. If he has questions, then the reader will. The editor can attempt to find the answers and work them into the story. Or he can return the story to the writer (call the wire service if it's a wire story) to get the answers.



There is more to editing than making a story read smoothly. The editor must satisfy himself that the story is fair; that both sides of an issue are presented; that, if a person accuses another in a quote, the accused gets a chance to reply; that topics mentioned in the abstract are brought to specifics; and that there are no unanswered questions.

The editor need not be a great writer to work efficiently. But he should be able to recognize good writing when he sees it. He should know when an adjective is performing an important job and when it is clutter.

A good editor has a love for the language. He is tuned to subtle rhythms or the awesome power of combinations of words. He should edit by sound, *listen* for good writing.<sup>3</sup>

The *Bulletin* of the American Society of Newspaper Editors asked some of the nation's top editors what they look for when hiring copy editors. Replied David Lipman, managing editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "A commitment to accuracy. An inner ear for English that lives and breathes. The knack of grasping not only what a story says but also what it fails to say. The good sense to leave well enough alone. Finally, a sense of humor."<sup>4</sup>

Marjorie Paxson, publisher of the *Muskogee* (Okla.) *Phoenix & Times Democrat* offered this: "A person who knows grammar, spelling and pays attention to detail. A perfectionist. One who can handle routine without having a fidget fit; who will use creativity and imagination to offset the routine; who is well-informed on a variety of subjects. A quick thinker with initiative, alertness, intelligence and awareness."<sup>5</sup>

It's little wonder that editors have trouble finding people who meet all those criteria. Much is demanded of the copy editor.

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## The Value of the Copy Editor

No position on the newspaper offers greater opportunity for growth than that of copy editor. Work as a copy editor provides the chance to continue an education and an incentive to climb to the top of the newspaper's hierarchy. Copy editors must of necessity accumulate a warehouse full of facts they have gleaned from the thousands of stories they have been compelled to read and edit or from the references they have had to consult to verify information.

Copy editors are super detectives who incessantly search stories for clues about how to transform mediocre articles into epics. The legendary Carr Van Anda of *The New York Times* studied ocean charts and astronomical formulas to find missing links in a story. Few editors today would correct an Einstein formula, as Van Anda

3. Kenn Finkel, speech to Penney-Missouri Newspaper Workshop, Columbia, Mo., March 8, 1983.

4. "10 Editors Tell What They Look for in a Copy Editor," *ASNE Bulletin*, February 1984, p. 30.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 31.