





**CONTEMPORARY**

**EDITING**

**WORKBOOK**



BETH ROGERS THOMPSON

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# CONTEMPORARY EDITING WORKBOOK



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# Introduction

This book is intended to help you prepare for a career in news copy editing. We know from years of experience on copy desks that the problems in the exercises are the same ones that come up frequently in copy editing. Although the Internet and the World Wide Web are revolutionizing communications, copy still needs to be edited. Even though home computers can run the same sophisticated layout software that major newspapers and magazines use, design still needs to be understood. Even so, editing for the Web is increasingly important, and the last chapter of this book should give you a basic understanding of differences between print and online editing. But we can't cover everything; there is no substitute for experience and judgment. What we have tried to give you is enough practice for you to know whether copy editing is a good career choice for you and — if you can correctly do these exercises — enough experience to get your first job. Whether in print or online, there will always be jobs for people who know the rules of language, headline writing and visual presentation. The information explosion will ensure that.

Since 1986, we have taught several hundred students copy editing, both at Penn State and at Metropolitan State College in Denver. Each of us has more than 15 years of news writing and editing experience, including stints as reporter, copy editor, slot, wire editor, assistant news editor, assistant city editor and section editor at the Greenville (S.C.) News, the Charlotte (N.C.) News, the Charlotte Observer and the Rocky Mountain News in Denver. In addition, we continue to do freelance editing and writing. We draw on this experience every day we teach and believe that it is reflected in this book.

We want to thank Marisa L. L'Heureux at NTC/Contemporary Publishing for asking us to write this book and Lisa A. De Mol for her expert supervision of us and the publishing process. We also want to thank NTC's copy editor on this project, Linda LiDestri. No one knows more than we that even copy editors need copy editors when they write. Although we worked independently from them, Cecilia Friend, Don Challenger and Kathy McAdams, the authors of this book's companion volume, *Contemporary Editing*, shared some of their thoughts and ideas with us. Finally, we want to thank our colleagues at Penn State and elsewhere for their help in this endeavor and throughout the years we have worked together.

If you have any questions or comments about the book, please contact us at the College of Communications, Penn State, University Park, PA 16802; by e-mail at [wbt3@psu.edu](mailto:wbt3@psu.edu); or by phone at (814) 865-1336.

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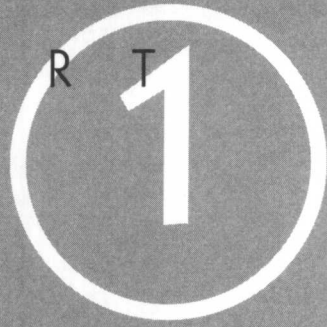
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# *Approaching the Story*





# Developing the Editor Within

Copy editors play a crucial role in determining the success of a newspaper, magazine or Web site. They make sure stories, headlines, photo captions and graphics are accurate and readable. Copy editors often work under tremendous deadline pressure, for after all, it doesn't matter if a publication consistently produces award-winning stories if that publication is consistently late arriving on readers' doorsteps or computer screens. Although the techniques and styles of copy editing have changed over the years, the fundamentals of ensuring quality and meeting deadlines have remained constant. The exercises in this chapter are designed to give insights on how copy editing fits into the operation of the newsroom. The exercises also introduce some of the skills that copy editing requires.

## Exercises

1. Choose a locally written news story in a local newspaper or, if you are away from home, one from your hometown. Call or visit the city desk, and find out the name and position of each person who handled that story after the reporter turned it in and before it was set in type. If possible, get a copy of the reporter's unedited version, then explain how each person modified or otherwise handled the story.
  - a. Who wrote the headline and/or photo captions that accompanied the story? Were these modified by the copy desk chief or another editor before reaching their final form?
  - b. Talk to the writer, and get his or her reaction to the editing of that particular story. Were any errors injected along the way? Does the reporter think the headline accurately reflects the story?
  - c. If the story had to be trimmed to fit the allocated space, does the reporter agree with how it was cut or have suggestions for more appropriate information that could have been omitted instead?
  - d. If the story appeared in both print and on the Internet, were there any differences in the two versions? Explain in detail.



2. Go to the library and compare the front pages of today's edition of a nationally distributed newspaper such as The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times or USA Today, and your local or hometown paper with editions of those newspapers from:

The day you were born;

The birth date of one of your parents;

The birth date of one of your grandparents.

For each of these front pages:

- a. Compare and categorize the number and types of stories.
- b. Describe the design, or appearance, of the page, and note, for example, the number of columns and the use, number and relative sizes of photographs and other art elements.
- c. Compare the headline characteristics: wording, relative sizes, the number of characters or words.
- d. List the sources used in the stories. Compare the representation of government officials, experts, other individuals and/or institutions. Note how information is attributed to these sources, including the use of words such as *said*, *says*, *claimed* and *according to*. Are anonymous sources used in any of the stories, and if so, how are the sources referred to?
- e. Compare the length (number of words and sentences) and style of language used in the lead paragraphs.

## *Focus on News Judgment: The Editor's Attitude*

An important skill for all journalists, perhaps especially copy editors, is to develop a sense of how a publication reflects and serves its community. This includes news judgments — not only considering the elements of news, such as timeliness — but also an understanding of the audience. What's interesting and relevant in one city may be of little or no concern in another. A particular event might be run as a long story that starts on page 1 in one newspaper, be reduced to a three-paragraph brief on an inside page in another, and not even be mentioned in a third paper. As an editor, you also must make judgments about headlines, layout, photos and graphics that enhance stories and give readers clues to their relative importance that day. The following exercises will give you a glimpse of these editing responsibilities.

### **Exercises**

1. To get a closer look at the demands of copy editing, choose an editor at your local or hometown newspaper and spend part of a day with that person, observing the meetings he or she attends, the various tasks performed on the job and the interactions with reporters, copy editors and other staff members. Write a brief, hour-by-hour activity report of that person's day, commenting on what you observe.
2. Interview an editor or manager at your local or hometown newspaper about the copy-editing positions there. What skills are required? What qualities and experience does this particular publication look for when hiring a copy editor?

3. Look at three different newspapers from the same day: a nationally distributed newspaper, such as The New York Times, Los Angeles Times or USA Today; a major regional newspaper, such as the Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Denver Post, Philadelphia Inquirer or Portland Oregonian; and a local paper or your hometown paper. Compare and contrast:
  - a. The top story of the day — differences in placement on the page, leads and headlines;
  - b. Use of photos, graphics, maps and/or charts;
  - c. Mix of local, regional, national and international news stories;
  - d. Mix of wire news vs. staff-written stories.
4. In your local or hometown newspaper, find a story that has a weak or buried lead and rewrite it. How would you explain your changes if challenged by the reporter?

## Focus on Skills: Tools of the Editor

As a copy editor, you must ensure that each story reads well from beginning to end. This means checking to make sure every person in the story is fully identified (no last names without first names, for example); that the lead contains the appropriate information; that the story contains a “nut graf” if it doesn’t begin with a traditional who-what-where-when summary lead; that there are no “holes,” or missing details; and that transitions move the reader logically from one idea to the next. You should consult the reporter or assigning editor before making major changes, but sometimes you will need to do some rewriting and fact checking or even fact gathering to make stories accurate and complete.

### Exercises

1. In the following three stories, one or more paragraphs appear out of sequence. In each story, rearrange and number the paragraphs so the story would flow more smoothly and logically. Make a note of the “clues” that tip you off to the correct arrangement, such as titles and names, first references or transitions.

#### a. Sex shops

State judges are continuing to label adult video stores and some strip clubs that limit pornography sales and nude dancing to less than 40 percent of their floor space as “nonadult,” which enables them to remain open. But how long the businesses can withstand falling profits and rising legal costs remains to be seen.

Since the crackdown began, 59 of the 144 strip clubs and adult video stores affected by a new zoning law have closed or shifted to nonadult entertainment, city officials say. But state judges have been upholding a legal strategy that has allowed many of the shops and clubs to stay open.

Three months after a spate of padlockings heralded the arrival of a crackdown on New York City’s sex shops by the administration of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, a string of legal victories by adult business owners has turned what looked like a speedy rout into a war of attrition.

**b. FedEx**

Ballots will be sent this week to the 3,200 members of the FedEx Pilots Association. The union hopes to complete the balloting by Nov. 20.

The union said in a statement it was forced to take the vote because of a lack of progress in contract talks. The company's pilots, more than 90 percent of whom belong to the union, have never had a contract since they became unionized in 1993.

Leaders of the Federal Express pilots' union voted unanimously Sunday to seek strike authorization from members.

Under the proposal, total career earnings for a FedEx pilot would reach \$9.1 million, while UPS fliers make \$9.7 million, according to the documents.

The company also said the proposal would improve schedules, raise retirement benefits, keep the vacation plan and prohibit the company from using non-FedEx airplanes and crews to deliver cargo.

FedEx chief executive officer Ted Weise countered the company has a proposal on the table that would put pilots "in the very top echelon of the airline industry in every major category."

His comments were in a cover letter sent Saturday to pilots, along with copies of the latest contract offer and an actuarial study showing the total compensation package would move them from ninth in the industry to No. 2 behind UPS.

Union officials say the study is flawed and that the company wants pilots to work 8 percent more for a 4 percent pay increase.

The union's executive board already has sent ballots to pilots asking whether they would be willing to refuse to work overtime during the Christmas season. The results of that vote will be announced Thursday.

They say career compensation for FedEx pilots is 37 percent below their top rival United Parcel Service, while retirement compensation is 213 percent below United Airlines.

## c. MS

In multiple sclerosis, the body's immune system attacks the protective sheath around nerve fibers. The three multiple sclerosis drugs approved in recent years work in various ways to trick the immune system into stopping or slowing the attack, Dr. Van den Noort said.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is urging anyone given a diagnosis of the disease to start drug treatment immediately rather than wait for symptoms to worsen.

Although medication exists to treat multiple sclerosis, fewer than 50,000 of the 300,000 Americans who have the often-crippling nerve disease are taking the three drugs that slow the progression of it but do not cure it, a society spokesman, Dr. Stanley van den Noort, said on Friday at the organization's leadership conference.

"Within 5 or 10 years, I suspect that we'll have something better," Dr. Van den Noort said. "But we don't know what it is. And this is the best thing we've got. And it's safe. And it works. It's not perfect, but it does reduce the attack rate, and . . . there's pretty good evidence that it does stop the accumulation of disability."

The society has provided only information about treatments in the past. It did not say which of the three available drugs – Avonex, Betaseron and Copaxone – is best, said Dr. Van den Noort, a neurology professor at the University of California at Irvine, and the society's chief medical officer.

But in its first treatment recommendation, the society said all multiple sclerosis patients should be on medication, since it appeared that those taking the medication would most likely suffer fewer disabling symptoms than those who did not.

Multiple sclerosis patients typically lose some problem-solving capacity and short-term memory. The majority end up in wheelchairs or need assistance with walking, Dr. Van den Noort said.



Each of the three drugs cost about \$1,000 a month and must be injected weekly to daily.

Many doctors are still unfamiliar with the drugs because they have been available only since 1993. And there remain questions about the benefits of the drugs when weighed against their high cost, effort for the patient and discomfort.

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2. Reorganize and edit the following story so that it flows more logically. Also, note any questions you would need to ask the reporter:

#### **HealthSouth**

BELLEFONTE, Pa. — Health care giant HealthSouth Corp., its CEO and his wife have filed a libel suit against a Penn State employee for the statements he allegedly wrote about them on a Yahoo! Inc. Web site. Two Miami attorneys for HealthSouth traced the messages to the Penn State e-mail address of State College resident Peter D. Krum. The suit was filed Wednesday in Centre County Court, about a month after the attorneys filed a subpoena to get Yahoo! to find out the message writer's identity.

Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon said Krum is listed as a food and beverage handler with Penn State Hospitality Services, which operates the Nittany Lion Inn and the Penn Stater Conference Center Hotel.

Fischman said Krum worked as a food service supervisor at HealthSouth Nittany Valley location from January 1995 to December 1997 before leaving voluntarily.

Krum had used the name Dirk Diggler—the name of the porn star character played by actor Mark Wahlberg in the movie *Boogie Nights*—in posting messages on the HealthSouth message board on the Yahoo! Finance Web site, according to the lawsuit.

Yahoo! is a global Internet media company headquartered in Santa Clara, Calif., that founded the first Web site for navigating the Internet. Its Yahoo! Finance site provides electronic message boards for anyone to discuss particular companies.

HealthSouth, based in Birmingham, Ala., is the parent company of HealthSouth Nittany Valley Rehabilitation Hospital in Pleasant Gap.

HealthSouth describes itself as the largest provider of outpatient surgery and rehabilitative health care, with more than 2,000 locations in all 50 states, the United Kingdom and Australia. It reported revenues of more than \$2.8 billion for the first nine months of 1998.

The company's lawsuit asks for compensatory, punitive and special damages, plus attorneys' fees and costs, and other relief.

One of the 14 messages listed in the lawsuit said HealthSouth "will stop at nothing to maintain the image of a respectable company. They (dump) on their employees in the blink of an eye." Another calls the company's senior management "white trash" and calls it inept. Other messages listed in the lawsuit make references to sexual acts.

The lawsuit calls the statements "false and defamatory."

Many of the messages target HealthSouth Chief Executive Officer Richard Scrushy and his wife, Leslie Scrushy, who live in Birmingham.

"None of it's true," said Bruce D. Fischman, one of the Miami attorneys who filed the suit. "Richard and his wife don't even know this guy. The allegations that he makes about the company ... are absolutely inaccurate, and were stated to make people believe they were accurate. The only purpose of this could have been to cause harm to the Scrushys and to HealthSouth."

"I can assure you that Richard Scrushy and his wife found it horribly offensive and distressing," he said.

When asked about the lawsuit, Krum said, "I don't know anything about that," and declined to comment further.

Yahoo! spokeswoman Diane Hunt said the company doesn't comment on specific cases and said the company only releases a Web user's personal information if it receives a court order or subpoena.

She said the company requires a verifiable e-mail address for all users of the Yahoo! Finance Web site. The terms and conditions of Yahoo! message boards instruct users not to send any messages that are "abusive, harassing, tortuous, defamatory, vulgar, obscene (or) libelous," among other warnings. Hunt said someone could "potentially" sign up for a message board and start sending messages without reading the terms and conditions.

Messages on the Internet, as short-lived as they may be, are still considered published statements under libel and defamation law, said Clay Calvert, a professor of communications and law at Penn State and co-director of the Pennsylvania Center for the First Amendment.

"The key thing for publication to occur is that one person other than the parties to the case read" the message, he said, adding that he was speaking generally and had not seen the HealthSouth lawsuit. "Libel may occur on the Internet, just like it can in any other medium," he said.

The lawsuit says the statements would make HealthSouth's customers "lose faith in the operations, integrity and financial soundness of HealthSouth."

Robert A. Martin, a Bellefonte attorney representing HealthSouth in the case, said the statements against Richard and Leslie Scrushy could have the same effect.

"Certainly, defaming principals in the company has to have an effect on the perception of the company," he said. "It's pretty hard to separate the two."

"I think you have to look at all the statements in their entirety, rather than one in particular," he said.