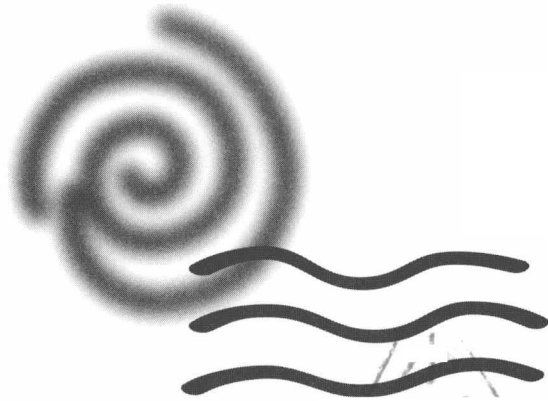




# CONTEMPORARY EDITING

CECILIA FRIEND  
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# CONTEMPORARY EDITING



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To Ray Simon, Tony Vella and Richard Cole—mentors,  
friends and models of excellence.

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# Preface

It is hard to imagine a more demanding time to become a news editor—or a more rewarding one. Editing is at a historical moment of self-evaluation and debate. Traditionalists worry that many of the standards of the past have fallen by the wayside. Futurists await a 21st-century news culture in which once-passive readers and viewers will help define and organize the news in innovative and interactive ways. The next generation of editors will chart new directions that balance the values of the past with the realities to come. It is a monumental task. It should also be a lot of fun.

In some ways, editing standards *have* slipped noticeably in recent decades. Editors typically receive less training in basic skills, particularly grammar, than they once did. They also have less time to work closely with stories and writers because their jobs have been expanded to include tasks, such as producing pages on computer, that were once handled by others.

Yet in other ways, editing practices are more sophisticated than ever. Editors and their audiences are able to absorb and evaluate more information from a wider variety of sources than at any time in history. Modern editors have a more flexible and democratic sense of what the news is than their predecessors did. They share a clearer knowledge of how words and images inform and influence people. And all good editors know—at least in those moments after deadline when the pressure gives way to a sense of accomplishment—that the job they do is crucial to a world held together by information. When more news is available from more sources, editors become essential, not expendable.

Editors in the newsroom perform a variety of tasks and hold a variety of titles, but their mission comes down to this: Editors manage information. They plan, organize and ensure the quality of the news. Some editors make decisions about coverage, direct reporters and photographers, and oversee policy. Others, known as copy editors, devote most of their time to evaluating and improving stories, writing headlines and deciding how the results can best be presented to readers and viewers. Most of you who pursue editing jobs will begin as copy editors; for that reason, most of the skills addressed in the following pages are copy-editing skills. Those skills are the foundations on which all editors think and act.

*Contemporary Editing*, however, is more than a guide to copy editing. It understands the copy editor to be not a technician, but an editor *in the making*. While copy editing remains a distinct discipline with its own honored standards and traditions, the conventional image of the copy desk as an



isolated corner of the newsroom where specialists ply their trade in silence is no longer accurate. In the 21st century, good copy editors will transcend the job description from the moment they log on to their computers.

This book, therefore, places the emphasis on *editor* in the term *copy editor*: It does not expect you to graduate into management positions, and it devotes only passing attention to the tasks of assigning stories, organizing coverage and directing reporters. Those abilities evolve with experience. However, *Contemporary Editing* consistently encourages you to see the mechanics of copy editing in a larger frame of reference that looks backward to reporting and coverage decisions, ahead to the news audience and its needs, and outward to the demands and dynamics of a multimedia culture.

Thinking about all those things while attending to the details of a story about a town election or a distant earthquake is a tall order, of course, but it also offers immense rewards and pleasures. However much they may complain about the workload, most editors love their jobs. They get to balance highly developed technical skills with healthy doses of creativity. They must bring an intense focus to each task, but they begin with a clean slate each day. Their work may not be highly visible outside the newsroom, but it is respected and appreciated by colleagues. Editors are constantly in demand in the job market and are usually better paid than reporters with the same amount of experience.

Most important, editors *matter*. Their work is read and viewed by hundreds, thousands, even millions of people; those readers and viewers are influenced to think and sometimes act on the basis of editors' decisions. Editors deliver what Philip Graham, former publisher of The Washington Post, once called "a first rough draft of history"—the stories that give meaning and direction to public life in the moment they occur.

## THE PHILOSOPHY OF THIS TEXT

With the field of news editing in a period of transition, this text reconciles the strongest traditions of the past with the emerging demands, promising innovations and new technology of the 21st century. *Contemporary Editing* is based on six fundamental beliefs:

**Editing is not an arcane or mysterious discipline.** It grows out of basic cognitive and rhetorical skills—ways of thinking and communicating—that we all share. But it also builds on those skills to help you address a news audience. Everyone may be an editor, as the futurists say, but only trained editors are able to edit for a diverse and changing public.

**Grammar, style and writing skills remain essential to editors.** Journalism should always be open to unique styles, innovative techniques and challenges to convention. But accuracy, precision and consistency are crucial because editors and reporters speak in a public voice. A language of inclusion is a language of clarity and common meanings.

**Fundamental editing skills and ideas cross media boundaries.** Newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the World Wide Web have developed different approaches to the news, but those differences evolve from common principles that, once understood, shape and improve all the means by which we tell stories and evaluate facts.

**Editing skills are no longer an afterthought to writing skills in journalism training.** Computerized newsgathering and design, the growth of online media, the emphasis on new story forms and the emergence of information graphics all require a level of editing expertise and critical thinking unimaginable just 25 years ago. Good editors have long known how to think like reporters; today, reporters often need to think like editors.

**Editing decisions always have an ethical dimension.** Credibility comes from doing the small things well and doing them consistently. Fairness is in the details. Larger debates about ethics in the media are pointless when accuracy and reliability are neglected.

**Ideas about news are evolving, not exploding.** Approaches to editing need not pit tradition against innovation at every turn. Editors make more informed choices when they think of the old and the new as part of a larger pattern of continuity.

In addition, *Contemporary Editing* places strong and repeated emphasis on the importance of accuracy and consistency, and shows you specific techniques through which to achieve them. The book provides an extensive introduction to such specialties as local news, wire stories, features, briefs, polling stories, information graphics and online editing. Most important, it focuses throughout on the role of news values and news judgment as a flexible frame of reference that enables editors to think critically about the meaning and importance of events and issues.

## ORGANIZATION

*Contemporary Editing* offers 16 chapters in three parts. The first part, Chapters 1–5, is devoted to fundamental approaches and skills. It provides general insights into the editing process, explains the copy editor's place in the newsroom, offers an extensive grammar review and extends your knowledge of good writing practices. The second part, Chapters 6–12, gives more specialized treatment to a number of editing tasks and story forms, as well as the legal and ethical issues you must consider when editing a story. The final part, Chapters 13–16, covers important editing issues beyond the story: handling photos and information graphics, designing pages and editing on the World Wide Web. Here is a breakdown by chapter:

**Chapter 1: Focus on fundamentals: The editor within.** The introductory chapter demystifies editing by relating it to basic ways of organizing and

communicating information that we all share. It then explains how professional editors build on that foundation, and offers a historical overview of editing traditions and how they are reshaped by today's multimedia environment.

**Chapter 2: Focus on news judgment: The editor's attitude.** This chapter addresses how a news editor thinks. It focuses on news judgment, the news values, and how editors can use them as flexible but reliable points of reference. It also introduces the concepts of audience, diversity, bias and ethics.

**Chapter 3: Focus on skills and tools: The editor in the newsroom.** Here you are introduced to general copy-editing skills: how to read and evaluate a story, how to check facts, quotes and spellings, how to master essential math, and how to use copy-editing symbols. This chapter also provides guidelines for using computers and newsroom resources.

**Chapter 4: Focus on grammar: The mechanics of language.** This review of grammar fundamentals also provides an explanation of why standards and consistency are crucial in news editing. The chapter focuses on grammar issues common to newswriting and presents full explanations of concepts that most often pose problems for reporters and editors.

**Chapter 5: Focus on good writing: Strong and graceful prose.** This chapter extends the principles of correct writing to *good* writing—building on sound grammatical principles to help writers shape coherent, powerful prose. It emphasizes simplicity, pacing and respect for the writer's voice. It explains how transitions, quotations and attributions work and shows how to identify and eliminate redundancy, jargon, clichés, slang and misused words.

**Chapter 6: News close to home: Editing local and community news.** Local coverage has long been the heart of American journalism, and it places distinct demands on editors. Here the book addresses what it means to work in close proximity to the audience: News values shift and the relationship between media and audience becomes more interactive.

**Chapter 7: News from afar: Editing wire stories.** Why does news from distant places matter? How can important stories from national and world sources be made meaningful and compelling for a local audience? How does an editor handle the sheer volume of news transmitted by wire services? This chapter addresses the wire editor's responsibilities, with an eye to the technical aspects of handling computerized wire copy.

**Chapter 8: Making a long story short: Editing for brevity.** When audiences have less time and want more news, traditional story models must evolve. Web sites in particular rely on tightly written yet lively summaries throughout their

pages. Here you are introduced to techniques for trimming stories and writing briefs—a format of growing importance in every news medium.

**Chapter 9: After the fact: Editing features and more complex story forms.** This chapter explains how you can adapt and improve your skills to work with feature writers and stories. It focuses on types of feature leads, story forms beyond the inverted pyramid and writer-editor interaction.

**Chapter 10: No safety in numbers: Poll and survey stories.** Here you are introduced to fundamentals of polling techniques and shown how polls can both serve and mislead news audiences. The chapter emphasizes specific skills that editors can use to evaluate polls and poll stories.

**Chapter 11: Doing justice: Legal issues, ethics and bias.** This chapter reviews recent media controversies as a starting point for thinking about the editor's responsibilities toward the audience and the law. It explains basic legal and ethical concepts and gives you the tools to approach them critically.

**Chapter 12: Headlines: Precision, power and poetry.** This chapter reverses the usual headline-teaching process. First you are shown how to think headlines through in a four-part sequence that emphasizes accuracy, clarity and insight; you then adapt your new skills to the technical demands of headline counting and sizing.

**Chapter 13: An eye for news: Editing photos.** Here you are shown the basics of evaluating, choosing, cropping and sizing photos; in addition, you will get extensive advice on writing cutlines, an often-overlooked aspect of print editing. The chapter also considers ethical questions involving both videotape and still photos.

**Chapter 14: Showing the story: Editing information graphics.** This primer on displaying information visually explains the workings of a variety of graphic elements, from simple information boxes to detailed data maps. It pays particular attention to the accurate representation of numbers and explains how to keep graphics distortion-free and up-to-date.

**Chapter 15: The balancing act: Designing pages.** Here you will learn the fundamentals of page layout, including contrast, proportion, unity and the modular packaging of stories, headlines and visual elements. While the emphasis is on broadsheet newspaper design, the discussion is extended to include other formats and media as well.

**Chapter 16: From gatekeeper to guide: Online news and 21st-century editing.** The final chapter addresses the changing role of the editor as the World Wide Web emerges and matures as a news medium. The focus is on how news judgment and its traditions can be adapted to a new technology with its own priorities, potential and risks.



## FEATURES

Each chapter of *Contemporary Editing* begins with an overview and ends with a summary that encapsulates the chapter. The chapter closes with a variety of exercises to help you practice what you have just learned.

In addition, each chapter following the introductory chapter is accompanied by an informative profile of a professional journalist, titled “Insight,” that shows you how editing skills and concepts are applied in a working newsroom. Many chapters are also accompanied by an “Editor’s Bookshelf” that offers suggestions for further reading and study. Boxes throughout each chapter highlight individual topics and offer practical tips. Appendices at the back of the book provide an extensive list of often-misused words and a glossary of important editing terms.

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Cecilia Friend  
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