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# Introduction
## *What Do Copy Editors Do?*

Copy editors deal with words—and with people. They are expected to focus on details such as grammar and punctuation, and they should be capable of addressing broad issues of content and focus. They need to have more advanced computer skills than most people in the newsroom, and they should have visual skills that enable them to see how text and images work together. Copy editors can be the "glue" that cements relationships between sometimes warring factions in the newsroom. Their greatest asset is their ability to think critically and to criticize constructively, and these skills are best employed by editors who respect and are respected by others in the newsroom. The best copy editors think strategically—they have the tools, but more important, they know how and when to use these tools.

Many talented word editors downplay the important human dimension of their craft, and as a result they are not as successful or productive as they could be. Ignoring people skills often leads to unnecessary friction between editors and writers and gets in the way of producing the best story possible. The purpose of this text is to look carefully at editing skills and people skills. Editors who develop both sets of skills—who are good wordsmiths as well as good communicators, negotiators, colleagues and critical thinkers—are in great demand. In this text, therefore, I define *editing* as a set of language and critical thinking skills as well as the ability to

interact professionally and productively with others in the organization. Moreover, editing is the strategic application of all those skills.

I also assume that editing can be done well, even under deadline conditions, but that how well it can be done is always constrained by time, staffing and other institutional considerations. This approach—both practical and strategic—reflects the editing process at some of the most-respected newspapers in the country.

In most editing instruction, one tacit assumption is that perfection is within reach. This book, grounded in three decades of newspaper copy editing and teaching experience, sets perfection as a goal but is written from the perspective that the time pressures involved in news editing make perfection unattainable. The prudent goal is to do as good a job as possible in the time available and to become better at managing time and setting priorities. These are keys to becoming a better editor. A fundamental skill in deadline environments, one that is seldom taught, is knowing when good enough *is* good enough. Editing is decision-making, and one important skill is knowing when to stop editing.

Another focus is on strategies to meet the goal of high-quality editing. All copy editing texts provide examples of poor editing and flawed headlines and demonstrate how to improve them. As any editor knows, fixing is a big part of the job, and this book will discuss many examples of writing that needs fixing. It also will deal with coaching, which operates at a different level and uses a different logic. The broader goals of this book are to foster critical thinking about the process of editing, to discuss strategies of editing and to examine the received knowledge that has long been a part of editing education. For example, rather than simply say, "This is the rule that most newspapers follow," I ask: "Does this rule serve a purpose? Is it still valid?" One simple example is the rule long followed by many newspapers that headline writers should not split thoughts that belong together. I would argue that this rule on "splits" should be retained because keeping related elements together makes headlines clear and readable. Another example is the rule that some editing instructors and editors follow about not "padding" headlines. They argue that auxiliary verbs and articles are typically unnecessary in newspaper headlines and waste precious headline space. I agree that sometimes such words are unnecessary, but in many cases, the articles and auxiliary verbs are necessary for headline readability and clarity. These two considerations can be more important than saving a character here and there or awkwardly forcing another idea into the mix.

The themes in this text arise from my experience as a professional

copy editor, most of it on the copy desk at The Philadelphia Inquirer, a newspaper widely known as one of the best-edited papers in the country. They also come from my 10 years as an editing teacher and my occasional work in consulting and coaching. A third area that provides a backdrop for this book is research. I have studied and written about editing and newsroom change for more than 10 years.

Most of my views on editing stem from newspaper copy editing, but their application is broader. They are appropriate for editing on the Web, and many of the ideas and strategies should have a home in any type of editing in which print information is presented.

## MEDIA CONVERGENCE AND SPECIALIZATION

The buzzword in journalism education these days is "convergence," a word that defies simple definition. Many media scholars and professionals define *convergence* as the tendency for different media forms—print, radio, television, online—to coalesce into one. Others think of it as an approach to publication or presentation—that media organizations should strive to disseminate information in whichever form makes most sense at a given time. An example is Tribune Co., the parent of the Chicago Tribune, WGN television and radio, cable TV operations and several Web sites in the greater Chicago market. "Convergence," to the Tribune Co. might mean that a story broken by a Chicago Tribune reporter would get to the public first via broadcast, cable or the Web, which are more timely, and only later in the newspaper, which operates on a daily rather than on an up-to-the-minute deadline schedule.

The need for specialized editors in specialized media industries might be overtaken by convergence at some point. Print editors then will have to understand their craft as it applies to electronic media and multimedia as well. For the near term, however, print-editing issues are distinct enough to require their own elaboration. Electronic media do have lessons to offer print, and there are common issues across media boundaries, but video editing is quite different from print editing in the tools and techniques editors actually use. The differences are striking enough and important enough to write a book aimed at a print audience, particularly print journalists who work in deadline-based environments.

As for the Web, for the time being, it is largely print on a screen because of bandwidth limitations and because business models and technolo-

gies have not been developed that make true online presentation of multi-media information viable to more than a narrow slice of the online public. News organizations have been experimenting with online multimedia forms for at least five years, but those forms—primarily video and audio clips—are not yet fundamental to the message, as they are in traditional broadcast news media. They are digital sidebars—available to users who have an interest in them and the patience and level of access needed to see and hear them without unacceptable delays. That situation may change, but I believe—and I track this issue closely for my students' sake—that it will not change substantially for at least several years and perhaps not for several more.

Others will disagree with me on this point. For example, several universities are shifting to a generic, even a multimedia, approach to journalism education to prepare students for a multimedia future.[1] Many others are considering carefully whether they should change. Practice with multimedia forms is a good idea for journalism students in all media areas, but I believe the jury is still out on whether the schools that have moved the fastest are too far ahead of the curve. The Web is here to stay, but whether it will supplant traditional news media or whether television will become the locus of convergence are unknown at this time, despite the overconfident predictions of futurists. The dot-com crash of the last two years has further muddied the picture. Research that colleagues at two other universities and I have conducted on the practice of editing and on the teaching of editing at accredited schools suggests that my view is consistent with the beliefs of most faculty members who teach editing.[2] Other work I have done strongly suggests that these views are similar to those held by editors in the newspaper industry on the whole.[3] There is great demand in the newspaper industry for students who have print-based skills, and there is yet little demand in print newsrooms for copy editors with skills in multimedia editing and presentation. There are journalistic Web sites, such as CNN and MSNBC, that rely on multimedia information as well as text and photos. But for now, print-editing skills are more fundamental to Web editing, as the background of so many Web editors strongly suggests.

## A PHILOSOPHY OF COPY EDITING

A typical news organization has many positions with the word "editor" in the title. There are, for example, city editors and features editors, design

editors and photo editors, managing editors and copy editors. This book is written for copy editing students and copy editors, but the nature of the work copy editors do is not well understood, and many editors who are not called "copy editors" spend a significant portion of their time copy editing.

The practical definition of copy editing—in effect, what copy editors do all day—varies by type and size of publication, and to some degree by organizational culture. At a small newspaper, say a community daily of 15,000 circulation, copy editors wear many hats. During a typical workday, they edit stories, write headlines and design pages. Some also act as department or desk editors, choosing wire stories, updating stories with new information, assigning stories to reporters or helping reporters shape their stories. A smaller number are responsible for photo editing, graphics and digital image adjustment. Some prepare stories for the paper's Web site. Copy editors at papers of this size typically work with a variety of computer applications, such as a front-end text-processing system and a pagination program such as QuarkXPress. Some use Photoshop and perhaps even a graphics program such as Freehand or Illustrator. Some do HTML coding.

At the other end of the spectrum, the largest metropolitan dailies, copy editors typically are responsible for two tasks: editing copy and writing headlines. They work on a front-end editing system and typically do not use any computer applications other than online archives and the Web. At those papers, other editorial tasks are done by specialists such as section editors, page designers, photo editors, photo technicians, Web producers, and so on. In general, the larger the paper, the greater the specialization, but some small and midsize papers structure the job the way large ones do and a few relatively large papers define copy editing more as their smaller counterparts do.

Some publications, because of tradition or management philosophy, limit the responsibility of copy editors in the realm of word editing. At those papers, copy editors are expected to check accuracy; ensure that grammar, spelling, usage and punctuation are correct; keep an eye out for potentially libelous statements; and write headlines. Questions about a story's focus, logic, organization or fairness are handled by other editors. At other papers, including most of the best-edited publications, copy editors are encouraged to pay attention to all of those matters—the broader issues as well as the more detail-oriented ones. This approach not only benefits the news organization, it benefits the copy editor as well, enabling him or her to develop and employ a range of skills that he or she can use across a wide variety of news positions.

Copy editors best serve the publication and its readership by looking at the text-editing portion of their craft holistically—by paying attention to the broader issues of fairness and focus as well as to the more narrow ones of grammar and punctuation. It is true that other editors are primarily responsible for the broader issues; it is also a given that such problems often will be missed. Copy editors can provide a safety net for the newspaper if they are allowed to do so, and this book assumes that a copy editor's responsibilities range from the very narrow to the very broad in the area of word editing. Beyond word editing and headline writing, a copy editor's duties depend on the degree of specialization a newspaper can afford.

The overall structure of this text is based on a related idea: that copy editors work on a number of levels. Editing well means being able to focus on different levels at the same time—in effect, to see not only the forest and the trees but also the branches, twigs and leaves, and sometimes even the veins in the leaves. The best editors do not lose sight of one level while they are immersed in another. At the narrowest focus, editors make sure the commas are in the right places. At the broadest level, they may play many roles, sometimes on the same story. They might be supporter or critic, good cop or bad. They must be detectives, and occasionally they might be confessors. They need to develop the skills to help writers say what they want to say, and as Ron Patel, a former Sunday editor from The Philadelphia Inquirer, used to say, they need to be able to "hear the music" of the story.

Some issues cut across all aspects of copy editing. For example:

Editing is about rules. Copy editors must ensure that writers follow rules of grammar, punctuation, usage and style. They must pay attention to the headline and caption rules that most papers follow, and they must see that rules specific to a given publication, or even a section of a publication, are followed. Copy editors have no greater love of rules than others in the newsroom. But because copy editors are the last line of defense, the "palace guard," they often are tarred as comma-chasers or petty bureaucrats slavishly dedicated to the letter of the law. Some copy editors, unfortunately, behave in that stereotypical way. Good copy editors are wordsmiths, not word police. Editing is about following rules, but it also entails occasionally breaking them and questioning them when they don't seem to help or they fall out of date. Good copy editors maintain a respectful but critical stance toward rules.

Editing is about making choices. It is about deciding what's OK and what isn't, what's worth pursuing and what isn't, what needs to be

checked, what should be checked if there's time and what doesn't need to be checked at all.

Editing is about critical thinking. It's about analyzing and questioning. Copy editors are not automatons; their most valuable skills are their ability to think independently and to examine critically. Newspapers serve readers well when they encourage copy editors to be "readers' representatives."[4] When copy editors look at stories as a thoughtful, critical reader does, they have the best chance of finding the problems readers might find, asking the questions readers might ask, and raising the same sorts of concerns readers might raise. Maintaining that stance is sometimes difficult; copy editors, after all, work alongside reporters and editors who have already approved the story. Office politics and personalities can get in the way of independent criticism, but there is no better way of ensuring quality than focused, constructive criticism.

Editing is about working together to provide the best-possible journalism. It's about respecting others and insisting on respect from others. It's about learning when to hold one's ground and when to back off. It's about balancing the sometimes-conflicting goals of different groups of professionals—for example, the word versus the visual experts.

Editing is about balancing perfection and pragmatism. Top editors might say they want perfectionists on the copy desk, but what they really need are committed, skilled pragmatists. Copy editing is about blending skill and common sense.

Editing is about ethics. It's about ensuring that stories are fair, that all sides are heard, that questionable assertions are questioned and that the accused have the opportunity to respond. In doing so, copy editors are much like reporters. Ethical issues underlie headline writing as well. The headline is often the only part of a story that a reader sees, and copy editors should write headlines that are fair and accurate, that preserve important qualification and attribution and that do not hype the story. Editing is about a belief that fairness and balance serve everyone's interests best.

In short, editing is about both skills and strategies.

## A FINAL WORD

This book focuses on strategies to deal with each level of editing and to balance the often conflicting demands of different levels. Chapters 2–6 deal with editing copy, starting from the more detail-oriented issues and

working up to broader ones, cumulatively, as I do in my editing classes, but realizing that all the levels are important and that one must not ignore any of them. Chapter 7 is a detailed discussion of people skills and how to solve problems. Chapters 8–12, which deal with writing headlines and other display type, also move from the simple to the complex, from straightforward news headlines to multi-element packages that require integrative and visual thinking. The book discusses page design in Chapter 13, and it talks about the editing of infographics, but not their creation, which is a highly specialized skill. This lack of discussion about the more visual aspects of the craft should not be considered a comment on their importance. The ability to think visually is a fundamental skill for editors at all levels, and many college-level editing classes include such issues. In my opinion, students should use a good design text, such as Tim Harrower's "Newspaper Designer's Handbook."[5]

Chapter 14 looks at change in the newspaper industry and what it means for copy editors. Chapter 15 explains how copy editors can continue to learn and grow in their field. Chapters end with a section on tips and strategies that can help.

This text does not include a discussion of wire editing, that is, selecting stories from wire services, or working as a department editor, such as a city or features editor. With rare exception, students do not become wire editors or department editors at the beginning of their careers. Newspapers do, however, offer excellent opportunities for students to enter the field as copy editors, and even novice copy editors are expected to know how to edit copy well and write good headlines. The training and techniques involved in wire editing and department editing differ enough from place to place that training in these areas is best left to individual newspapers. Working as a journalist means lifelong learning.

I spend more time on certain areas than other texts do (e.g., logic, precision and people skills), and I spend less on some topics than others do (e.g., spelling and style). Other references that should be part of a student's or a journalist's library—a good dictionary, a stylebook, a grammar reference and an atlas or gazetteer—deal with those subjects in more depth than any textbook can.

Throughout the text, I make some claims or offer opinions that other editing instructors and editors might disagree with. When I do so, I mention it and attempt to explain my reasons. Some of my ideas might be considered more "liberal" than traditional practice, such as discarding the rule

on headline "padding." Others may appear too conservative to some, such as my belief that excessive electronic manipulation of headline type can generate bad headlines and bad habits in headline writers. Disagreement can be healthy, and I would urge instructors to use these issues as points of discussion in class.