

OK, Listen Up. This Is Simple

We make the same mistakes over and over again. Let's stop it, starting now.

The reluctance to fix bad writing is rooted in an institutional reluctance to make what should be considered minor editing changes, for the sake of preserving a writer's "voice." Some newspapers require that a copy editor clear even the simplest editing with writers. This has to stop, and it will stop if we just go ahead and do it.

Is that professional suicide? No. The best writers will appreciate it. Most writers won't notice it. The bad writers might complain and look all the more foolish for doing so.

Of course, it helps if you have no ambition to be anything but a copy editor. Rising in the ranks invariably requires compromise, which might improve your status but does nothing for coherence.

Sue Me

Basic techniques for getting what you want:

•Make sure your copy-desk chief knows that you are serious about your work. In return, the chief should be expected to trust you.

•Develop a relationship with the top editor of your newspaper or section. Establish that you will go to him or her only with serious matters and that you expect support.

•Every so often, go to a reporter or assigning editor with polite objections to something the story would be better without but that you could live with. After explaining your objections, appear to "cave in" and let the offending passage stand. You are "reasonable" and "collegial."

•Don't make a major production out of everything. Just fix it.

•Occasionally you will come across something awful that you know everyone will want to keep. Fix it anyhow. If you are called on it after publication, shrug your shoulders and say, "What can you do?" Reserve this for really bad stuff. It could backfire.

Hundreds of Papers Use AP Unedited

The bad thing about Associated Press copy, which many newspapers run without editing, is that it's so bad. The good thing is that you can do whatever you want with it.

By ROGER PETTERSON
Associated Press

It's not even May yet but it feels like July this week as temperatures climb into the 80s and the low 90s from the Plains to the East Coast, drawing people outside in shorts and T-shirts.

"Who wants to be inside?" asked Johnnie Harrison, who took eight daycare children to a park in Albany, N.Y., where the early afternoon temperature was 73. "It's too hot to be inside."

73? It's a heat wave, all right. Shorts and T-shirts! In spring! And, nice ear for quotes, there, Roger.

By MARTIN FACKLER
Associated Press

SHANGHAI, China--Call it an upgrade of the Great Fire Wall of China.

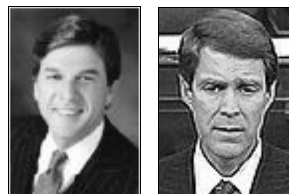
The what? Call it a day, Martin.

Sporting a hearing aid in his left ear, the accused rapist looked pale as a half-dozen protesters outside the courthouse screamed "pervert" and denounced prosecutors for

not blocking the release. ***Sporty.***

From a story about Michigan Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm and her all-day retreat with department heads:

The daylong meeting began at 7:30 a.m. and included a working lunch of chili, chips and brownies before breaking up at mid-afternoon.



Smith, left, and Frist

Sometimes—often—you just have to spike it. This "story" presumes that Smith and Frist look alike, which they don't:

WASHINGTON Just call him "Doctor" Smith.

That's how some Capitol denizens have been addressing Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Ore., since his colleague, heart surgeon and Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist, was elevated to Senate majority leader last month.

"I've had more people come up to me ... and call me 'Doctor,'" an amused Smith said this week.

Smith—a frozen food ex-

ecutive before his election to the Senate in 1996—reminds visitors that he is from Oregon and assures them that "Senator" is fine.

The confusion is understandable.

*** No, it isn't. ***

"Why edit it again? It's already been edited," said a copy-desk chief in upstate New York in the early 1980s, explaining why he put AP copy into the newspaper without changing it. AP knows this happens, which explains its endless "writethrus."

WASHINGTON--Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill visibly fought back emotion on Thursday during a bitter verbal confrontation with the Senate's senior Democrat that ranged from congressional rule-making to both men's careers and poor up-bringsings.

1st Ld-Writethru; recasts throughout

WASHINGTON--A budget hearing exploded into a battle over humble beginnings between a lecturing senator and a treasury secretary whose eyes flashed--and grew moist--with raw emotion.

Keep trying.

Stoopid Science Writing

The wonders of science can stand on their own. Why, then, do science writers—or, more likely, their editors—insist on trivializing science stories by using similes from “everyday life”? The technique is especially absurd and insulting when used in stories about cosmology:

SEATTLE (AP) — Like a family member booted out of a dysfunctional household, a small, young star has been ejected from a star group in the constellation Taurus and is now wandering away on its own, astronomers say.

Researchers at the National Autonomous University of Mexico showed that the star was gravitationally ejected from its family after a close encounter with two bigger brothers.

*We are stardust, we are golden,
We are ... billion-year-old carbon ...*

—Joni Mitchell

WASHINGTON—Mother Nature is a messy housekeeper. She leaves dust everywhere—not just under the bed, on the closet shelf or be-

hind the pictures on the wall.

Huge quantities of dust also clutter outer space, blotting out stars and galaxies and screening the center of our Milky Way from human eyes. (Knight Ridder)

With its black hole nursing an eating disorder, its magnetic lines tangled like spaghetti and a ring of clutter left from a collision with a dwarf, Earth's home galaxy looks more and more like a mess that not even Martha Stewart could pretty up. (Washington Post)



Because I Say So

"When someone has a heart attack and dies while he's shoveling snow, it's not a 'storm-related death,' any more than a person who is blinded looking at a solar eclipse can blame the sun. My favorite of the genre, perhaps apocryphal, is the guy who was electrocuted by lightning, while installing a TV antenna on his roof during a thunderstorm."

'COLUMBIA IS LOST'

The first headline that comes to mind often is not the best choice if you haven't trained yourself properly. "Columbia Is Lost," which really didn't give a clue to what had happened, was so "obvious" that it was used by the Washington Post, Chicago

Tribune, Oklahoman, Free Lance Star (Fredericksburg) Denver Post, Gazette (Cedar Rapids), Lawrence Journal-World, Jackson Sun, Indianapolis Star, Raleigh News and Observer, Miami Herald, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Los Angeles Times, Oregonian,

Patriot News (Harrisburg), Pittsburgh Tribune Review, Maine Telegram, Seattle Times, San Jose Mercury News, San Diego Tribune, Reno Gazette Journal, Rapid City Journal, Press Democrat (Santa Rosa), Syracuse Post Standard, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Newark Star-Ledger, State Journal Register (Springfield), Statesman Journal (Salem), Baltimore Sun, Sun Journal (Lewiston), Times Record News (Wichita Falls), New Orleans Times-Picayune, Albany Times Union and the Joplin, Mo.,

Globe, among others.

Especially on big stories, for which newspapers have a "historical" mission, big headlines must tell the story.

Also, please remember: If you think you've written a "clever" headline, especially one that employs wordplay, think again. Run it through Nexis to see how many times it's been used before and ask yourself if you really want to add to the list.

Time-saving tip: If you're writing a headline about France-bashing, forget "Gaul."



testycopyeditors.org

The Testy Copy Editors Web site deals with this sort of thing all the time. Please look in, register, and participate. We are not an "editor's toolbox," so don't go there looking to find out whether midnight is "p.m." or "a.m." We are polite to each other but most impolite toward work whose authors aren't around to defend themselves.

Newspaper copy editors and their fans talk shop.
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Telecommuting for Copy Editors

About the time men should be walking on Mars, telecommuting is still rare in the newspaper business, at least for copy editors.

When the Washington Post started using its new editing system, I asked for and received full remote access. There is nothing I can't do at home that I can do at my desk in downtown Washington, except bore my co-workers with my pontificating. The internal messaging system is also accessible remotely, so if I have any questions, I can get answers quickly. I usually use messaging at the office anyway. If I have to talk with a reporter, obviously that's not a problem either.

My original motivation was personal. I was appalled at the number of days I stayed out of work last year because my presence at home was required, mostly because of school closings (the authorities still won't allow me to leave my 5½-year-old son at home without supervision) or when my son was ill. My wife and I alternate missing work under such circumstances, although her line of work sometimes forces her to miss a turn (she is a midwife and often

is tied up catching babies, or seeing patients at a clinic downtown). A couple of times last year I was too ill to leave the house and go downtown, but not necessarily too ill to work. Each of us can think of times when we're up for work but can't get into the office.

In Chicago, I often did work from home but my job toward the end of my time there was mostly wire editing. Many editing systems can't be used remotely for copy editing. The Post's system--CCI Word--can. You really need a high-speed connection for it to work well, but obviously I have one.

Since I obtained remote access to the system I have worked four full shifts from home: once when my son was ill; once when I had car trouble, leaky plumbing and a foul mood; and two "snow days" this week.

Newspapers are no different from other businesses in that they have an institutional resistance to telecommuting. Usually the objections come down to the fact that bosses like to see the people they supervise. That is a valid concern in many enterprises, but not newspapers. It



would be pretty difficult to disguise goofing off if you're on the rim virtually. Supervision might be a factor if an employee is a known work-shirker or needs constant guidance, but most experienced copy editors actually like editing copy. It's wrongheaded to present telecommuting as a privilege; after all, it's the employee's computer and the employee's high-speed connection, used to keep the rim at full strength. In a "wry nod" to the "supervision" concern--even though it has not been expressed to me--I provide the main office with a live webcam feed from my home office so all who care to can see that I am hard at work.

To the Post's credit, no objections have been registered except for the vague observation that somehow,

it just doesn't seem right. That reminds me of Theodore Bernstein and Robert Garst, who wrote in the final edition of "Headlines and Deadlines" that editors probably will always want to handle hard copy.

The prospect of remote access also is attractive to newspapers making contingency plans should "terrorism" make the main office inaccessible. It's a lot easier to station copy editors at home than it is to get them to a remote site, which might have limited computer resources and might be difficult to reach in a time of public panic.

Some home-networked copy editors might be able to provide workstations for a colleague or two.

—Phillip Blanchard

Hacks I Have Known

L was a superb city editor in his day. When I was a “cub reporter,” he watched as I hyperventilated about the difficult logistics of covering a big fire. “What’s my deadline? What if there’s no phone? What if the chief won’t talk to me? Will I have enough time to talk to the neighbors? What if they don’t let my car through the lines?” I prattled.

“Just cover the damn fire,” L told me. He had little patience for major productions. I learned a lot from him.

Fourteen years later, when I returned to L’s newspaper as a copy editor and slot man, I was at first delighted to find him on the copy desk. What a font of information, I thought. How lucky it was that the reporters of 1986 had such a resource from which to draw.

But L was just marking time. He came in at 5 every day, sat down and plowed through whatever was tossed his way, quickly and without comment. His copy editing was competent but just barely so. His headlines were serviceable but nothing better. He went home for lunch at mid-shift every night and came back carrying bad novels to read during his down time and, also, a hint of the Scotch he professed to love so well.

My first role model had become a hack.

L retired a couple of years after I left

the paper for Chicago, and died not long after that.

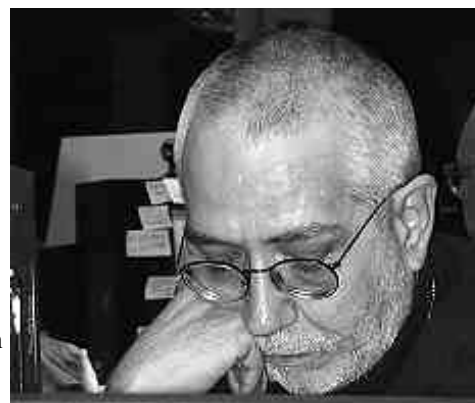
Throughout my career I have encountered hacks. Most of them were personable. Most of them went through the ritual of juggling eyeglasses with various prescriptions so they could read copy on their VDTs. A good number of them were drunks or reformed drunks.

Almost all of them were frank about their ambition: They had none. They talked a lot about retirement, and most of them had hobbies or other avocations that they clearly cared about more than they did newspaper work.

They generally could be depended upon to move copy quickly. Usually one of them was the guy who got the Page One story that moved an hour and half past deadline, because he (exclusively, the hacks I knew were men) would fix the spelling and write a usable headline in no time.

We could always go back between editions and do it right.

As I approach the age of 50, hacks are on my mind because of a dreadful fear of becoming one. In my more rational moments, I realize that while I may, regrettably, have become mildly eccentric in my middle age, I would have to slide considerably to become a hack. (Most



hacks are eccentric, but not all copy-desk eccentrics are hacks.) It is true that I have to go through the eyeglass-fumbling ritual when I arrive at work, but I can’t be blamed for failing eyesight.

My strategy for avoiding hackdom is simple: I try to remain engaged. In previous positions, that was not a problem; as what might be laughingly called a “key” editor, I had specific responsibilities for entire sections of the newspaper.

Now, as a “pure” copy editor, I find it necessary to stick my nose into other people’s business to maintain the level of engagement I require to stay reasonably sharp. No doubt others find this annoying at times, but I am willing to accept that judgment if it helps me avoid obsession with fly-fishing, building a vacation home, or investing to finance a “comfortable retirement”—a term I consider oxymoronic.

--Phillip Blanchard

Didn't Have to Prove a Thing

NEW YORK (AP)— Rap impresario Sean “Puffy” Combs was acquitted Friday of toting an illegal handgun into a crowded Manhattan hip-hop club by a jury that believed the Grammy-winning multimillionaire’s repeated claim of innocence.

No. Juries do not have to believe in someone’s innocence” to acquit, only that the prosecution has not proven

its case beyond a reasonable doubt. The jury found Combs “not guilty,” which, as we all know, is not the same as “innocent.”

Incidentally, why in the past few years has AP started reporting that people charged with crimes “pleaded innocent”?

One of the first things journalists (used to) learn is that the plea is “not



guilty,” and report that, not to guard against accidentally dropping the “not,” but because that’s the plea.

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STACK: