

# OK, Listen Up. This Is Simple.

## Take This Prize And Shove It

*Ten seconds. Count it: One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Ten seconds was roughly how long it lasted. Nobody had a stopwatch, nothing can be proven definitively, but that's the consensus. ... Ten seconds is barely a flicker. It's a long, deep breath. It's no time at all. It's an eternity.*

So began a series of articles in the Chicago Tribune last year. You may be familiar with them because they won a Pulitzer Prize this spring.

Everyone in this room knows that such writing is dreadful. We could spend all afternoon identifying the many things wrong with that paragraph.

We don't know how the copy desk reacted when confronted with it, but it's reasonable to assume there was a wince, followed by a mental rewriting, then the sinking feeling you get when you know something is awful and there's nothing you can do about it.

But it's not every day we get a bundle of stories intended for the Pulitzer entry. Most of the stuff we handle will be forgotten in a few days. It's a sad fact of life that we can fix stories not intended to win prizes.

It is a myth that newspaper writing was better long ago; take a stroll through the pre-Watergate archives if you don't believe me. But it's getting worse now, and we all know why: Contest judges like "writerly" efforts, but most judges really don't know what good news writing is. The detrimental influence of contests, from the mighty Pulitzers to the most modest award from a farm bureau, cannot be overstated. I have heard writers and editors muse about winning Pulitzers before a word was written.

Many copy editors long for recognition, which helps explain the fairly recent proliferation of headline contests. There are copy editors who emulate their writing colleagues and pursue prizes. Their headlines show it. Most prize-winners are groaners; others might be worthy of praise if they did not commit the worst sin of headline writing by drawing attention from the stories they adorn.

An occasional contributor to the Testy Copy Editors Web site, whose name you would all recognize but who is a man who lives the modesty he preaches, wrote: "One of the great things about being a copy editor is freedom from vulgar desire for public recognition." He expressed a sentiment that is dwindling. The great Theodore M. Bernstein wrote in "Headlines and Deadlines," which is the best copy-editing manual ever written but is sadly dated and fallen out of use, did it better: "The business of writing and editing news is a cooperative undertaking, demanding the best of many brains. There is no place for pride of authorship." Who believes that these days?



The "Cat in the Hat" character, created by Theodor Geisel and controlled by Geisel's widow, is being used to sell kid-friendly foods. The U.S. Postal Service has a "Cat in the Hat" postmark.

## *Buy This! Buy That!* *Says Cat in the Hat*

Product Tie-Ins Add Millions to Movie's Take

## When You Must Be Cute

Every once in a while, you'll get a story that you just know will get a "clever" headline whether you write one or not. When you do, suck it up and get cute.

By taking the matter into your own hands, you can at least keep the stupidity to a minimum and avoid the worst sins of the genre — principally low word-play.

I was embarrassed by this dreadful headline over a story about "Cat in the Hat" merchandising, especially when people said how "good" it was. I survived because I knew it could have been a lot worse.

# One Way of Looking at It

By J.A. Montalbano

The copy desk of the Albuquerque Tribune updated its stylebook for the first time in eight years, and I led the effort.

We strove for simplicity. When we left you all last year, that was the goal, and I think we succeeded.

We took out about as many entries as we added. We ironed out AP inconsistencies; now, for example, we hyphenate all forms of “baby-sitting.” We use common sense and standard capitalization with proper names.

We eased restrictions on words that had mysteriously stuck in the craws of editors and slots long departed.

(There had been an entry cautioning the staff about the use of “mom” and “dad,” for instance.) For headline writers, we’re again allowing more than rockets to “launch” and not just outdoorsmen to “hike.” (I was raised in Chicago tabloid tradition, so I have no problem with pols [including Dems] nixing a gov’s plans.) In copy, a fire can be called a “blaze” once in a while. In general, we’re getting a little less stuffy - allowing the language to breathe again without dragging it into the gutter.

This process was not without controversy. Not everyone wanted to lowercase the “The” before publication names or drop the courtesy title

“Dr.” (Have you read the epic AP Stylebook entry on “doctor” lately? That’s a lot of space they could save.) “Data” is now singular.

The boldest move: using the American spelling of “theater” in all uses, even in the proper names of venues. The features editor tipped this one in. I was flexible. She said many groups and art houses aren’t consistent with their own names, sometimes alternating between “Theater” and “Theatre” from press release to press release. We’ve gotten no complaints. And we all have one less thing to think about. We’re moving on.

## Some sample entries from the Albuquerque Tribune Stylebook

### guy

Acceptable shorthand in headlines for *governor*. Don’t overdo it.

### names

Follow AP’s “Cassius Clay” rule with names but let common sense and good judgment guide you in punctuation and capitalization. A few rules:

- It’s K.D. Lang, E.E. Cummings, Matchbox Twenty and Adidas, et al. Do not indulge those fond of all-lowercase letters or eccentrics who like to pretend their name is a symbol.
- Drop exclamation points and similar punctuation in names and titles (*Salud health care, Yahoo online, Traditions marketplace, Guess jeans, the TV show “Jeopardy”*) unless it is a helpful form of punctuation in the middle of a title (“*Yo! MTV Raps, “Oh! Calcutta”*”).
- A few performers (*Cher, Madonna, Twiggy, Eminem, Brandy*) have established one-name status. As a rule, use full names (*Beyoncé Knowles*).
- Do not use first names of adults in headlines. Often, this is a sign of disrespect and infantilization common in the sports world and disproportionately used for women and minorities. Examples: *Shaq, Martha, Oprah, Magic, Ichiro, Tiger*. Too often it gives the impression we think they have funny names. Sometimes it’s necessary to distinguish between those with a common name (be aware there are two O’Neals in the NBA, for example) or siblings, such as Venus and Serena Williams in tennis. In the case of the Williams sisters, for example, use the first name in the headline, if necessary, but try to use a mugshot with last name underneath.

- Try to avoid clunky dot-com constructions for Web sites with a title of more than one word. Instead of *TestyCopyEditors.org* or *TheSlot.com*, try: *I post regularly on Testy Copy Editors (www.testycopyeditors.org)*.

### said

We dare you to try to overuse *said*.

### words to avoid

These words are almost always superfluous, redundant or simply not needed:

- actually
- currently
- existing
- formal, formally
- immediately
- located
- new
- official, officially
- special
- still
- yet

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**Mild Dissent:** “Guv” was appropriate on Mel Brooks’s back in “Blazing Saddles,” but not in newspaper headlines. My colleague Jim Montalbano endorses its use based on his experience in the “Chicago tabloid tradition,” but “Guv” was not headline style at the Chicago Sun-Times when we worked there. “Guv” or “Blago” or “Jacko” in headlines conveys an attitude that most newspapers want to avoid. It seems odd that the Tribune would endorse “Guv” while insisting that first names not be used in headlines. —P.B.

# Stoopid Science

*News Item (1987): Scientists say the universe is shaped like a honeycomb.*

*News Item (1988): Scientists say the universe is shaped like a football.*

*News Item (1997): Scientists say the universe is shaped like a twisted bicycle inner tube.*

*News Item (2000): Scientist say the universe is shaped like a slice of cheese.*

*News Item (2003): Scientists say the universe is shaped like a soccer ball.*

*News Item (2004): Scientists say the universe is shaped like the Eiffel Tower.*

*You know. Approximately. (Zay N. Smith)*

You'd think the science writers and editors of America would have heard us by now: Trying to "bring down" news stories about the sciences by drawing ridiculous analogies is insulting to the reader, and to science. Sometimes, scientists themselves engage in such foolishness, hoping to reach a broader audience. Give the rabble some credit. Much of that broader audience will think, "slice of cheese my ass."

Fix this stuff.

*STOCKHOLM - Three American scientists won the 2004 Nobel physics prize on Tuesday for showing how tiny quark particles interact, helping to explain everything from how a coin spins to how the universe was built. (Reuters)*

*lings are about to be treated to a total lunar eclipse, just in time for Halloween. For more than an hour Wednesday night, the moon will be covered entirely by Earth's shadow and resemble a glowing pumpkin. (AP)*

*NASA's Mars rover Opportunity seems to have stumbled into something akin to a carwash that has left its solar panels much cleaner than those of its twin rover, Spirit. (New Scientist)*

*MADISON, Wis. - Call it much ado about almost nothing. To create buzz about an otherwise arcane subject, the University of Wisconsin-Madison showed off a tiny speck of zircon crystal believed to be the oldest known piece of Earth at about 4.4 billion years old. (AP)*

*CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. - Earth-*

*BOSTON - The humpback whale is*



*believed to sing its mysterious songs for the same reason generations of teens have started bad garage bands: to get girls. But researchers hadn't guessed how long or persistently the ocean crooners woo their women. (AP)*



Where newspaper copy editors and their fans talk shop.

[testycopyeditors.org](http://testycopyeditors.org)

The Testy Copy Editors Web site deals with this sort of thing all the time. We're not an "editor's toolbox," so don't come looking to find out whether midnight is "a.m." or "p.m." We are polite to each other but most impolite to writers and editors who aren't around to defend themselves.

# Start 'em Young, We Say

I work with students at the University of New Mexico who write for and edit the Daily Lobo. One of my tasks has been to help them simplify their writing. I focused on three areas:

- Don't try to tell the whole story in the lede. In fact, take that rule of thumb of about 30 words per lede and try cutting it in half when possible.
- Search out and destroy proper nouns. Jettison all capital letters that don't need to be there.
- After you've hooked me with the lede, give me an example of something I can picture or let me hear someone's voice.

A former student came by the other day. He works for my competition now. He said he's always thinking about my challenge to write a lede in 15 words and keep the proper nouns out of it. It doesn't always work, of course, and this shouldn't be turned into an ironclad rule or a word-counting exercise or a search-and-destroy mission. And while simple is best, there's always the danger of being cryptic and writing a "this could go anywhere" lede.

Results have been mixed, as you'd expect. But these days, I am more eager to read the Daily Lobo than I am to grab a story off the wires from the AP or New York Times.

## **The "pros":**

*PINELLAS PARK, Fla. - With her husband and parents feuding to the bitter end and beyond, Terri Schiavo died Thursday, 13 days after her feeding tube was removed in a wrenching right-to-die dispute that engulfed the courts, Capitol Hill and the White House and divided the country. (AP)*

*WASHINGTON - The Bush administration has used the Patriot Act's powers to listen to cell phone conversations and examine business records 84 times in 3½ years,*

*Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said Tuesday as Congress began considering whether to renew those powers and other sections of the anti-terror law. (AP)*

*JERUSALEM - President Bush on Tuesday demanded Israel stop expanding Jewish settlements, as a plan to extend the largest West Bank settlement threatened to cloud his upcoming meeting with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. (Reuters)*

## **The students:**

By Rivkela Brodsky

*There are 6,000 members of GPSA, but only one showed up to the presidential candidate debate Monday morning.*

By Marisa Demarco

*Lobo forward Danny Granger wanted to be a civil engineer when he grew up, but he might have to settle for pro basketball player.*

By Caleb Fort

*Faculty and staff could pay more for their health insurance plans.*

By Marisa Demarco

*A student in Donna Knaff's class plagiarized a paper. As part of his punishment, he was supposed to attend a panel discussion about plagiarism with her on Wednesday. The student didn't show.*

*"I have never in my career seen so many students not willing to come meet with us," said Dean of Students Randy Boeglin, a panelist.*

—J.A. Montalbano

## **Everyone's Talking About It. Do Something About It.**

Don't kid yourselves. Plagiarism and concoction are our problems. We are not ethics police by trade, but no one in the newsroom is better equipped than copy editors to stop stealing and fabrication.

Right or wrong, the business is especially sensitive to being exposed as less than honest. Usually when a plagiarism scandal breaks out, journalists rise to defend their calling and say that violators are the exception, not the norm.

While that's true, there's a lot of lifting going on and everyone knows it. Press releases are typed in verbatim,

or nearly so. The staff "writerly writer" is assigned to write the lede-all on the big national story and does so by lifting wire reports and rewriting them, usually without credit. Stuff found on the Web is taken without crediting the authors. It goes on all the time at newspapers big and small.

We might not be able to stop it, but we can sure put a dent into it. Take the time to confront that news-release typist. Be aggressive in asking lede-all writers where they get their information. Check "historical quotes" with Nexis or Web searches. Make it clear that nothing that's going to be the

subject of the next scandal is going to get through you.

This sort of zeal is likely to make you unpopular with some writers and editors. So be it. Surely you didn't become copy editors to be liked. Respected, maybe. Feared, in the best of all worlds. But not liked.

Recent well-publicized incidents of fabrication (by the sportswriter Mitch Albom and a Boston Globe stringer) rightly raise the question: Where were the copy editors? —P.B.