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Sue Burzynski Bullard

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, sbullard2@unl.edu

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# A few pointers from veteran news editors

By **SUE BURZYNSKI BULLARD**  
ACES member since 2008

Copy editors should stick this reminder on their computer screens: Never assume, never be timid.

Editing requires an aggressive approach to stories because the copy desk is the last line of defense against factual errors, bad grammar, libel and simply having the newspaper look stupid. Common rookie errors include making assumptions and being too timid, say copy desk chiefs and veteran editors.

## IT'S YOUR JOB TO ASK QUESTIONS

"Rookie copy editors assume that if someone before them let something through, they must have known what they were doing," said **David Sullivan**, assistant managing editor/copy desks for The Philadelphia Inquirer.

**Dawn Needham**, deputy news editor at The Detroit News, agrees.

"There's a timidity sometimes that can get in the way of the copy editing role," Needham said. "Copy editors need to be fearless, relentless fact-checkers and challengers."

Cincinnati Enquirer Copy Desk Chief **Sue Lancaster Vonderhaar** boils it down to a short motto: "Trust nothing, trust nobody."

**Becky Hudson**, assistant sports copy chief at the Los Angeles Times, says rookies need to get over their fear of reporters and assigning editors. "The sooner they realize that if they're questioning it, the readers will too, the better."

The best tip: Don't assume the reporter knows more than you do or what the reporter meant to say.

## REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE

Another pitfall: Beginners tend to zero in on the basics and lose track of broader content questions.

## *Newsroom pros' best advice on how rookie editors can stand apart from the pack*

**Merrill Perlman**, former director of copy desks for The New York Times and now a journalism consultant, said: "New copy editors also usually focus on style and grammar, editing too closely if anything, and forget to step back and take the 'big picture' look."

Added **Karen Grigsby**, night editor at The Tennessean: Rookie copy editors might find every style or spelling error, but miss a hole in a story.

"Rookies also don't have the institutional knowledge that comes with experience. So, for instance, if someone is new to Tennessee, he may not know the University of Tennessee's former president is John Petersen, not Peterson," Grigsby said.

## DON'T SPEED PAST THE BASICS

Copy editors, facing increased workloads and deadline pressure, need to fight the tendency to simply pass copy through without double-checking basics.

**Larry Sparks**, an online editor at the Omaha

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World-Herald, said that's a problem for rookies and veterans alike. "We all have a bad habit of getting into 'shovel' mode and forgetting to check on the basics."

That leads to superficiality or a lack of rigor, said **Chris Wienandt**, business copy desk chief at The Dallas Morning News and ACES president.

"In some cases, they'll write a headline saying something has happened when it's actually just planned; in others, the headline will say something is going to happen when in fact it already has."

## OTHER ERRORS TO GUARD AGAINST

**TIME MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS:** "They don't have the experience to prioritize their work as deadline approaches," said **Don Frost**, copy desk chief at The Detroit News. "They get bogged down on minor issues that won't affect the reader's understanding of the story."

**INSENSITIVITY:** Rookies at times try to be too clever on a serious story. "Experience and the tone of the story help define when to be serious and when to be offbeat," said **Herschel Kenner**, executive news editor at the San Jose Mercury News.

**OVEREDITING:** Rookies may overcompensate for a lack of confidence by changing something in every sentence. "Sometimes it takes a while to learn to let writers write but be ready to jump in when things are unclear or unfair or just wrong," said **Mike Bulger**, senior editor/presentation and technology at the St. Paul Pioneer Press.

**OVERLY RIGID RULES:** Good copy editors recognize that language changes. Writers can break rules if they are doing it for good reason.

*SUE BURZYNSKI BULLARD, an associate professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and former managing editor at The Detroit News, teaches beginning and advanced editing classes. E-mail her at [sbullard2@unl.edu](mailto:sbullard2@unl.edu).*