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Copy Editing And Sub-Editing

By

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Copy editing/sub-editing 1

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SINGAPORE EDITORIAL MANAGEMENT WORKSHOP

0900-1030 Friday, April 22: COPY EDITING and SUB-EDITING

No one suggests it is possible to teach copy editing or sub-editing in 90 minutes, let alone both, so this session is confined to gaining an understanding of the principles involved in each area. There are too many journalists who work in either area today who are confident that they do a good job, and technically they may be right, but their work lacks honest motivation and thus may not improve the copy nor offer genuine editing.

It is a natural progression from copy editing to sub-editing, so we should examine them in that order. Copy editing means improving the copy; sub-editing means organising the copy into whatever form it is required. The nature of both of these activities is changing as electronics progresses through the journalism profession.

Copy Editing

These days there are two forms for this to happen:
a) the traditional blue pencil approach of working with a pencil on copy which is already on paper,
b) the modern form, in which the originating reporter or the sub-editor works through a keyboard to improve copy on a computer screen.

Since reporters abandoned typewriters in favour of word processors or electronic copy terminals the responsibility for error-free copy, written in the proper style and the best possible words, has moved back to the reporter. In modern journalism the sub-editor is becoming more of a media stylist, working to design better newspaper pages or radio and television bulletin formats.

The reason is an economic one. Under the traditional system, with the copy typed onto paper, the edited version had to be typed again by a typesetter before it could be inserted in a newspaper page. This means reporters could and did include all sorts of accepted contractions which the sub-editor did not need to change because the typesetter would spell these words out properly. There is still a copy editing mark which means "spell this out".
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Now that almost everyone works on a keyboard and screen and typesetters no longer exist, these marks are neither needed nor used. It wastes time and effort to leave that sort of correction to a sub-editor. The reporter is expected to do the job properly from the start.

The Principles of Copy Editing and Improvement

1) to ensure that all copy is written so that it is absolutely clear to all who read it.

2) to check that the copy complies with the newspaper (or broadcasting station) style.

3) to make sure that the copy meets the volume requirements sought by the sub-editor.

This makes copy editing seem very simple, and in many ways it is, though this may be misleading. Copy editing means not only making copy comply with requirements (2 and 3 above), though that is important, but it is even more so copy improvement, no matter who undertakes the task. This is the area of 1) above.

Clarity is the first essential of all journalism on any subject in any medium. There are no rules for clarity, but there are guidelines, some of which have always been accepted as good journalism and some of which are much more recent.

1a) Use present tense whenever possible, and if you are improving your own or someone else’s copy, change it to present tense, unless this is inaccurate.

There are times when the past tense is unavoidable. If something happened or was said yesterday there is no excuse for not saying as much. Much of the English-language newspaper world has inherited the British tradition of using third person indirect past tense reporting style:

The Prime Minister, Mrs Benazir Bhutto, said in Islamabad yesterday that Pakistan would never again....

This reporting style was challenged by radio and is now being overcome in many parts of the world because of television. The style of the spoken word is replacing that of the written word, even in the arena of the written word. This has both advantages and disadvantages, but it is certainly happening. Under the revised writing style the same sentence might well read:

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said in Islamabad yesterday that Pakistan will never again...

Note the change in tense. This is the extreme spoken word version which mixes past and present tense in the one sentence. It is called the historic present, and it rests on the logic that Mrs Bhutto said it yesterday and because this is over and done it demands that it be reported in the past tense. But what she said is still valid today, so is reported in the present tense.
Clarity also demands that this is the best way to write it. Imagine for a hypothetical moment that the speaker, whoever it was, had made a much more dramatic statement (this one is entirely hypothetical and is used only as an extreme example):

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed said in Parliament yesterday that Malaysia had declared war on Burma.

or perhaps

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed said in Parliament yesterday that Malaysia was at war with Burma.

Overlooking for the moment that any such statement will have a background and should give the reasons for such drastic action, both the statements above are ambiguous. They make clear that at some stage Malaysia decided that a state of war existed between this country and Burma. Presumably the war broke out yesterday, though even this is not clear. Nor is it clear that the country is still at war. It was yesterday afternoon, but what about now -- your publishing time?

Clarity favours the tenses used in broadcasting and increasingly being adopted in print, such as:

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed said in Parliament yesterday that Malaysia has declared war on Burma.

or alternatively

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed said in Parliament yesterday that Malaysia is at war with Burma.

Both these make clear that it happened yesterday and imply, even if they don't actually confirm that this is still the case. If it was not the case it would be clear in the spoken-word style, such as:

Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed announced in Parliament yesterday that Malaysia was at war with Burma, but this morning peace has been restored without a shot being fired.

A good reporter will make sure that the necessary details appear in the next few paragraphs, so that there is no doubt when it happened and when and why war was first declared and then un-declared. The sole deciding factor -- apart from your house style which should rule on such things -- is common sense. You are writing it, so it is your responsibility to make it clear to all your reader.

Who are ALL your readers? In the case on those writing news reports it is exactly what it says -- everyone who buys or reads the paper. This means avoiding words which the readers will not understand. If, for some reason, you must use a new term which has come into the daily lexicon because it is the right and accurate word, then it is your responsibility to use it in such a manner that its meaning is clear. This may be defining the word, so the readers will understand it today and perhaps in future. It may mean wording the context so the meaning of the new word is clear.
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its meaning is clear. This may be defining the word, so the readers will understand it today and perhaps in future. It may mean wording the context so the meaning of the new word is clear.

In writing about specialised subjects there may be some latitude in the choice of words. Presumably only those interested in cars and who know something about them will read the newspaper's motoring columns. Even so, presumptions about the prior knowledge of the audience are dangerous, so never take risks with the level of such knowledge. When there is any doubt, assume that your audience knows nothing of what you are writing about.

Both print and broadcasting know that active voice is better than passive. Pompous politicians and public servants like the passive tense. It sounds more distant and official and it is much easier to use a lot of words to say very little by using passive voice. What are the clues to use of the passive?

The word "by" is the first one. The standard explanation of the passive explains why:

The man bit the dog (active) The man was bitten BY the dog (passive).

The problem is that the BY does not always appear. In reality the clue is the verb plus "by" but it is the "by" which is the obvious part. "The man was bitten" is still passive, even if the sentence does not say who did the biting.

Clarity also means writing sentences in their simplest form, which is Subject-Verb-Object. Of course not every sentence has to be so basic or readings your newspaper would become very boring. It is kindergarten English. But the theory is right enough, in that simple sentences are never inverted.

Starting a sentence with an "ing" word, as I have done here, is a sure sign of an inverted sentence. There is not much wrong with that one, though it would be better to write: A sure sign of an inverted sentence is one which begins with an "ing" word. The thrust of this guideline is that the sentence should begin with the subject, which is usually the significant part of the sentence content, and not with some qualifying or dependent clause or phrase. If qualifications are necessary, and they often are, then write them almost anywhere in the sentence but at its head. It is clearer that way.

House style speaks for itself. Those of you who work for a newspaper know what a help or hindrance the House Style Guide can be. It is a help only while the editor and his supporting management make sure it is regularly revised, perhaps on a five-yearly minimum. Style, like language itself, changes.

Your vernacular languages may not be as diverse as English, which has quite distinct rules for writing and speech. This means broadcast style and print style are far from the same, even though they use the same words. The dominance of television as a social phenomenon has meant that the language of print and writing in its traditional style is often considered stuffy, formal and out of date. So newspapers in Australia are steadily changing their reporting style to conform more closely with what the audience hears on television -- always with the reservation that the print form has more preparation time and thus must always be more correct than speech.
Nor is there really much need to explain here that your copy as a reporter or copy editor must fit what
the chief sub-editor wants. If the decision is to give six inches of space to a story, there is no sense in
writing twelve, or even seven. The original writer is the best person to cut a report to size, since no
one knows better what is important in the story. Having a sub-editor do the cutting is a British tradition
which is dying everywhere but in the British popular press, but more on this in a moment.

Before we pass on to sub-editing, a reminder on what copy-editing is and is not.

**It IS** copy improvement, which means it should first be done by the reporter and only checked by the
sub-editor. When the copy leaves the editing desk it should be error-free in spelling, grammar
and construction and be unmistakably clear to everyone who might read it. When the copy-
editing is done by a sub-editor the copy must also be free of legal risks from defamation or any
other law of the land, meet the size requirements of the day's newspaper or bulletin and be
accompanied by an appropriate headline which fits.

**It is NOT** copy amendment, which means any and every change to the original copy must be made for
a specific reason which leads to the copy's improvement. It is not acceptable for a sub-editor to
change a fact because he or she thinks the reporter has made an error. The change is justified
only after the fact has been checked. Nor should a copy editor change a reporter's writing style
simply because the editor thinks he or she can word it better. The change is justifiable only if
the change improves the clarity of what is meant, perhaps the fluency if the original is clumsily
written, or if the original does not meet house style requirements.

The extra requirements of sub-editing

Sub-editing begins with copy editing. The sub usually already has a page make-up dummy which
makes clear how much space has been allocated to a given report and where it will fall on the page,
what size and type of heading it will have. So although the sub-editor is also a copy-editor, or at least
a second copy editor, he or she has much more to do.

These days, with most of the editing and make-up done on computer screens, sub-editors are becoming
more and more specialists in newspaper make-up and design, which we look into further in another
session. But there are very specific tasks which a sub must fulfil in relation to the copy on the paper
or on the screen.

1. Is it legally safe?
2. Does it tell the story clearly (a check on the earlier copy-editing)?
3. The the heading accurately represent the story it heads?
4. Does the heading fit (physically)
5. Is the type size and style as required for the position and page?
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Whether a story is legally safe or not can not be part of this presentation, simply because the laws governing what may or may not be published vary from nation to nation. In Australia they vary from State to State. No matter what the nation or what the law, it is your job as a sub-editor to know it well enough to preserve your publication from penalty.

Copy-editing has already been covered, but it is still the sub-editor's responsibility to make sure the reporter has done his or her job well. If there are errors, the best course -- provided there is time to do so -- is to return the story to the reporter for a check and rewrite. This may not be the fastest way of getting the job done for the first few occasions, but the reporter soon learns to check the facts and not to make mistakes. From that time on, time is saved.

Writing headings is an art. This does not mean it is beyond the capabilities of those who do not have the art. The same rule applies to headline writing as applies in report writing; the larger the vocabulary of the person doing the writing the fewer words are necessary to make the report clear. In headline writing this means that the better educated the sub, the faster he or she will write headlines that fit.

And fitting is important. It is not just a matter of falling within the column rules. It also involves questions of balance, accuracy and emphasis; which line stands out (and which line should)?, which word is dominant (and is it the right one)?, does the headline have a verb and is its tense right (is it active and in the present tense)?

It is not a case of taking these one at a time. That is the artless style of headline writing. The best headlines occur to the mind all at once. In Australia, especially in the popular press which likes short, sharp and often cryptic headlines, there is a long and lengthening list of short words which are so overused they have become a media critics' joke. This is possibly because in our increasingly complex world more and more of our new words are polysyllabic monsters, not sub-editor friendly. It is always the sub's job to trim unfamiliar jargon words from the copy. It is even more important to control them in headlines.

It is an axiom that verbs make headlines. It is certainly true that every headline must have a verb, otherwise it is no more than a label announcing what the report is about. Some headline writers try to get away with an understood verb but this is not really good enough:

- Circulation Funding $1b overseas
- boost for taskforce for debts
- Saturday 'Age' rural hospitals each month:
- bureau

Doubly wrong: assumed verb, poor line balance no verb no verb
Better, but still not the best, is the verb "to be" or the infinitive form:

Abused 14-year-old claim to be checked
State legislates to grant $8 pay rise
Renegade Campbell to face counselling

Best of all is an active verb in the present tense:

Cook rules out more GATT concessions
Latest KNF claim 'untrue'
Norman says Premier crawl in
Open

Two of these headlines have shortcomings. The centre one has a concealed verb IS. The third uses a vogue word "slams", one from the overused words list for which subs try to find alternatives. You may find even further problems with them, though it is difficult without the original story by which to measure.

The principles of page make-up, which engages so much of a modern sub-editor's time, are the subject of a later session.

Any questions?