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Copy-Editing / Sub-Editing

By

Murray Masterton
Copy-editing/Sub-editing

It takes more than 90 minutes to tell anyone, no matter how bright, how to become a sub-editor. To show just how impossible it is, consider these three short quotes on the subject:

"Editing is one of the great specialisations in journalism and the sub-editor who is good at his (or in this case her) job is perhaps the nearest thing to what might be described as the complete journalist." That is from the National Council for the Training of Journalists in Britain.

"We begin with a message and reader, and editing and design fail if they do not connect the two as directly and efficiently as an electrical circuit." That one from Harold Evans, former editor of the Times and Sunday Times and considered by many the best editor of any paper in the past 50 years. He was speaking of the process of sub-editing.

"Editors seldom know what is going to be published in the next edition," wrote Donald Woods, the South African editor who became famous for his opposition to apartheid as well as his editorial abilities. He is writing about the process of production, which involves sub-editors and demands their talents.

How much of this can be covered in an hour and a half? And since these days most sub-editing work is done on a computer screen armed with one of many in-house newspaper production and editing programmes, and perhaps a programme providing electronic page make-up as well, trying to teach any of that in such a short time would be ridiculous.

So let us consider again the fundamentals of sub-editing, and of copy editing which is really only the first part of the process. Let us try in the time we have to put the process into context. No matter how long we have been subbing, it pays to ask ourselves at regular intervals not are we doing the job well, but are we doing the job a sub-editor is supposed to do?

What is a sub-editor supposed to do? Perhaps we should begin with what a reporter, or any journalist for that matter, is supposed to do.

1. He or she is supposed to write reports, stories or articles which communicate facts and ideas to the newspaper's readership.

2. He or she is supposed to do this in the language of the readership and in a way which reflects the perceived values and attitudes of the majority of the readers.
3. He or she is expected to write reports which meet these criteria and to produce copy which requires a minimum of editing.

So what of the sub-editor? Although a sub carries a seemingly endless number of responsibilities, from legal safety to eye-catchy typography and enticing use of pictures, there are basically only two fundamentals which describe the work to be done.

1. Sub-editors are there to help reporters achieve their principal aims and they should do so with minimum interference to the original text. This is subbing for Clarity and it makes the newspaper respected and credible.

2. Sub-editors are there to make sure that the materials provided by reporters, photographers, news agencies or any other source, are presented in the newspaper in such a way that the audience members are enticed to read as much of the newspaper as possible and to achieve maximum information and enjoyment from doing so. This is subbing for Effect and it makes the newspaper attractive, popular and probably prosperous.

Everything else for which a sub is responsible is a part of one or both of these fundamentals. Let’s take them one by one.

How does the sub help a reporter be a better reporter? First consider what does not help, but which many officious arrogant sub-editors do:

Making changes: The sub who makes changes without good reason is neither a good sub nor a good staff member. In fact he or she is a menace. There has to be a good reason to change the words a reporter uses, the sentence structure or the story’s sequence. Too often this happens because the sub in question feels he or she must dominate the reporters and leave his or her mark on every item subbed.

Such arrogance leads to confusion in the reporters’ ranks, and even resentment, since reporters who take the trouble to check what changes the sub has made so they can learn from them, find that the changes are needless. Sometimes they can even be dangerous. After all, the reporter who wrote the story is the person on the spot, the one who gathered the facts, and the one who should understand the story better than anyone else.

For the same reason, a sub-editor should not have to rewrite much. If a sub has to spend a large amount of time rewriting, it may be cheaper to get rid of the offending reporter in favour of someone who needs less rewrite. Those who are realistic soon realise that all writers, even genius novelists and editors of many years experience, need subbing, and it follows that sometimes they need a minor rewrite. At times we all write something with which we are not happy -- we don’t find the right word, can’t avoid a cliche, stumble of a sentence structure. This is where two heads are better than one and the second head is on the sub-editor. He or she is the reporter’s hind-sight.
It is another matter when dealing with a trainee, or one whose fact-gathering and news sense have not yet reached maturity. Changes and rewriting may be necessary much more often, but the journalism learner should be told in person exactly what was done and why. Only that way can the sub be assured he or she will not continue to face the same problems for years.

It is also another matter when a report is the work of several writers, or perhaps your own reporters and those of a news agency, or perhaps archive material. It is the sub-editor’s task to make a clearly understandable report from everything available. It often means reducing thousands of words to a few hundred, and writing or rewriting most of them.

For all this, it is still the case that the best subbing is done by those who recognise that their task is to understand what the writer is trying to make clear and to help the writer in that task.

**Checking:** everything from spelling, grammar and house style to the facts conveyed and any legal problems they may conceal.

It is because checking is so continuously necessary that subs’ rooms hold the heart of the newspaper’s reference library. The books thought necessary may vary from country to country, but their reason for being handy are always the same -- to check either the facts or the language in which they are being expressed. A British, American or Australian subs’ room will have an authoritative dictionary (the publisher may differ but not the quality of the publication), a good atlas, a thesaurus, certainly the electoral roles for the newspaper’s readership area and the telephone directories for far beyond, probably one or more *Who’s Who* publications, and a guide to the law (such as in Australia *A Guide to Australian Law for Journalists, Authors, Printers and Publishers*).

There are others which subs’ rooms may or may not include: Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, the *Guiness Book of Records* and perhaps a variety of other volumes on individual sports such as *Wisden’s* for cricket. And other almanacs under a variety of titles: *World Book of Facts*, *Whitaker’s Almanac*, *Factfinder*, to name only three.

Bigger newspapers support their library and their subs’ room with a whole series of local and national maps for specialised purposes and with archive-oriented publications such as *Keesing’s Contemporary Archives*, perhaps the best compilation of current history available.

These days *Keesing’s* is available on CD ROM, which saves on storage space and is quicker to use, though little less expensive. Also today a dictionary and thesaurus are built into many computer programmes. These may be functional -- though they have their lexicological handicaps -- but they have made the sub’s work even more solitary than it once was. Now subs refer to their keyboards and screens instead of asking each other "how do you spell...?" or "Does Fred Green have a final e?"
There are limits to the factual checking any sub-editor can do. Whose fault is it when facts appear incorrectly in the published newspaper? If it is an error the sub should have corrected, it is the sub’s, and he will have an uncomfortable interview with the editor (and the sub will probably call for a similar interview with the reporter). If it is something the sub could not have known and thus corrected, then it is the reporter who will have the uncomfortable interviews, first with the sub and then with the editor. An example of each: Singapore became independent in 1953 — wrong, and the sub should know it; The President’s wife wore blue (when she wore green) — wrong but the sub could not know it.

These are obvious extremes. Most instances of factual inaccuracy are less easy to find or even suspect. The more experienced the sub, the more efficient they are at correctly suspecting errors and correcting them. I don’t know whether it would occur in your country or not, but an example might be a court report which seems one-sided, where the accused is a reputable citizen who would be expected to argue vigorously or perhaps show extreme remorse. A sub-editor who is worth his or her job will suspect that the reporter was not in court and that the story came from elsewhere, possibly a friendly prosecutor. Such reports can occasion libel charges and perhaps even contempt of court cases, since there is no privilege or justification for a report which is unfair.

Another court example might be where a person is charged with two offences arising the same action. The police cannot succeed in both and usually choose to proceed with the more serious charge so they can fall back on the second. If the pleas and the court action are reported otherwise the sub should check it. The reporter may be right — such things have happened — but it is so rare it is worth the check. Most important of all, make no change until the check is complete.

Pictures and other problems.

First an example of a problem picture. What would you do if one of your newspaper photographers returned from the racetrack with a picture of a man drinking champagne from a woman’s shoe. The photographer has the names of the couple and the information that they were celebrating the fact that the previous evening they had decided to marry. What is your instinct as a sub-editor? Pass it as a good human interest picture and caption, or what? The real problem here is why you would come to your decision.

Such considerations are difficult for subs and reinforces the need for them to check, even when it might not appear necessary. Stories about engagements and weddings, even about births and deaths are usually safe, but the one in a thousand which arises from someone playing a practical joke on a friend or relative can cost the newspaper a lot of defamation money. It is true that in some countries, including the UK but not yet here (I am told) the law has been changed so that newspapers are not held liable for a deliberate hoax as long as they publish a correction and pay all the legal fees. Even this can be expensive.
Experience also brings the alert sub-editor a consciousness about the professionalism of the reporters whose work they handle and the reliability of their reports. For instance, if I am interviewed and the reporter gives my name as Masterton in the lead but two pars later refers to me as Masterson, what does the sub think and do about it? How can he or she check if the reporter has left the office? The story has to wait, perhaps be not published, or face a 50 per cent chance of having the name wrong - not a justifiable percentage.

It is worse when the reporter makes a statement in the introduction that is not supported by the reported facts. If the sub can take the time to find out the facts a rewrite will be necessary. If the sub can’t check the facts and the reporter has left the newsroom, the story will either suffer major deletions or may be dropped completely. The old guideline is still valid: WHEN IN DOUBT LEAVE IT OUT.

Everything said so far is how a good sub-editor helps a reporter to tell a story as informatively, interestingly, accurately and briefly as possible — subbing for Clarity.

What of the other trunk of the sub-editing tree — subbing for effect? There are just as many aspects to consider here.

Meeting technical requirements

No matter who makes the decision on how much space is allocated to a story to be subbed, cutting it down to size is not as much trouble for the sub as it used to be. WYSIWYG computers (What You See Is What You Get) have taken the guesswork out of determining the column length of a report in any given size of body type. All today’s sub has to do is excise the right number of words.

After all the checking is done the condensation is only the first part of this second subbing trunk. There is a straightforward sequence to doing this, although an experienced sub will carry out two or more steps at the same time.

a) cut out all irrelevant material, or that which is not needed to maintain absolute clarity when a story is to be cut heavily.

b) cut out all phrases or clauses which can be reduced to a word and all long words which are better replaced by short ones. The less relevant clauses, phrases and words will already have been removed in step a). If these two steps are completed expertly most reports can be by about a third, those from beginners can be halved.

c) If even more cutting is necessary to make the story fit, look at the structure to reduce or remove any parts not essential to the understanding of the report. If this proves not possible, ask the chief sub to allot the story more space. If it is worth running it is worth running properly. He will either agree and allot more space on the same or another page, or he will disagree and decide not to run the story.
That means he is making an editorial decision based on newsworthiness, not on his or her belief in your worthiness as a sub-editor. If there is any lack of trust in your ability the chief sub may insist that the story be cut further, so you had better make sure that all cuts consistent with clarity have been made before you refer the story. If a story is properly cut to its minimum commensurate with clarity, it should be cut no further.

Doing the cutting well also ensures against the frequent complaints from reporters that their stories have been "butchered", or whatever the appropriate word is in your country. I'm sure the complaint is the same.

Cutting reports from news agencies is no different, though there are two or three aspects an alert sub must always keen in mind.

a) is your newspaper reporting on the local aspects of the national or international wire story. There is very often a local angle, which makes the agency story much more relevant to your readers. If no one else has already taken action to get it, the sub should do some prompting. Tell the chief sub and whoever assigns reporters in your paper. That way more space will be made available early enough for the enlarged report to be well displayed, as one story or two. The same is true for reports which originate locally, so you should always check.

b) what follow-ups will there be for tomorrow. Make a note, and as early as possible either enter them in the newsroom diary or tell the assigner so that the follow-ups can be considered as possible assignments. Don’t be upset if this has already been done. It means others are also doing their jobs properly, but it is always part of the sub’s job to check and make sure.

These are hardly technical requirements, but they are still part of a good sub’s job.

Writing headlines

It may be unnecessary to go again through the guidelines which are supposed to help subs write good headlines. You probably know them already and realise that they can be broken, so they are hardly rigid rules. But just in case some of you grew into subbing by being promoted into the job after proving yourself a good reporter, it may pay to list the fundamentals of headline writing yet again.

1: The aim of a headline is to entice as many people as possible to read the story beneath it, provided that the headline is an accurate representation of the story and not a sensationalist or false one.

2: The best headlines are written in the type of language your paper’s audience uses -- plain words without artificiality.
3: The best headlines will, where possible, not only portray accurately what the story is about but also evoke an appropriate emotional response (if there is a valid one in the story).

After these there is a list of the Do's and Don’ts involved in actually writing your headlines. Call them rules, if you wish, but given a good enough reason they can still be broken.

1: Always write the headline last. During the process of copy correction and rewriting (if any) ideas for a headline are bound to occur, so use them. Also, by writing it last you make sure it does not include facts which are not in the published report.

2: Always include an active voice verb, preferably in the present tense. No passive headlines, please. Is there anyone here who does not recognise the passive voice?

3: Avoid punctuation unless it is absolutely necessary for total understanding. Punctuating to avoid ambiguity is not good enough. In such circumstances there is usually a better way to write the headline.

4: Personalise where possible. This means it is better to say Goh or Mahathir than PM, though take no risks where people are not well enough known to your audience members for their names to have instant recognition.

5: Don’t try to cram too much into the headline. Saying too much can occur when there is a strapline or sub-head as well, or both. The headline says so much there is no need to read the story.

6: Avoid abbreviations. Not everyone knows what they mean. There are some which are universally recognised, but make sure that this is so for your audience. A frequent complaint about Asian newspapers (especially South Asian) is that they use too many acronyms and initials instead of recognisable names.

7: Avoid using a comma as a substitute for a word. It is not, though it is often enough used wrongly because there is not enough room for "and". An example: Asean, EU officials find common ground at inaugural dialogue (Straits Times, 4-5-95)

8: Avoid "he" and "she" whenever the person remains anonymous. For example: She wins prize in journalism

This says nothing unless it is associated with a picture of the winner. Even then she is nameless. Who is "she"? It might as well read "Wins prize in Journalism".
9: Avoid using place names unless it is dishonest not to do so. An acceptable example:

Fishermen
ban Johore
market

The name has to be included to be fair to all the other markets and not to mislead the readers who might patronise them. It would also be making too much of the story not to use the name. The reason to avoid names in headlines is that they detract from both the appearance and the reader attraction of the page. Who in Singapore or Kuala Lumpur will read a report headlined:

Johore man
dies in car
accident

It will most likely attract only readers from Johore.
Similarly, if you sub on a newspaper in Bangkok, how often can you use the name Bangkok in headlines without the paper looking silly? This hardly needs more examples.

10: Avoid breaking two related words across lines in a headline. For instance:

Police deny they
stole from MP

breaks the link between "they" and what they are supposed to have done. It would have been better to write

Police deny theft
from MP's room

Here each line contains a whole phrase, or at least a complete word connection. (This is also the reason page make-up artists avoid putting a headline in the middle of a page. Half of it is lost when the paper is folded, but even then part of the headline still makes sense if it written properly).

11: Avoid headline jargon. Use it only on those occasions when you need it -- when you have to write a single-column headline for the last story on the top of the front page and the headline is needed immediately. Then, and only then, can "grunts" like hit, plea, quiz and rap become acceptable. At other times they are a sign of lazy or incompetent subbing.

12: Be aware that taglines and straplines cause special problems of their own. Consider this example:

TAKING FROM TIP
MAY NOT
BE STEALING
-- Judge
If the tagline attribution is any smaller it becomes difficult to read at a distance, which is one of the objects of a headline. It thus becomes of doubtful value, possibly of negative value. The headline would be better written without a tagline, as

**TAKing MAY NOT BE STEALING SAYS JUDGE**

It is always wise to write straplines (those that appear in smaller type above the main headline) last. Unless you write the headline before the strapline there is a risk that the main point of the headline appears in the small type and something less worthy in the big type. This means the main reason for the headline is destroyed and the headline attracts few readers.

Treat all these as useful and worthwhile guidelines when writing headlines of any kind, but know that they are not unbreakable rules. If you can create a better and more appropriate headline, a rule or rules can be forgotten. But your headline must be an obvious improvement and especially it must be appropriate, which is a question of taste as well as journalism. This example is from Australia and may not be appropriate in other countries. It arises from a report that the Prime Minister lost his temper with reporters who pressed him too close and swore at them.

**PM SWEARS AT REPORTERS**

is an adequate headline. It says what the story is about. But for some publications a more emotive or provocative headline would be better, as

**OH MR SMITH, SUCH LANGUAGE!**

Under the headline-writing guidelines this is open to criticism, most strongly because it contains no verb, but in the circumstances it would be trivial to insist that a verb be included.

**Making headlines fit**

This is a matter which causes differences of opinion between those journalists who learned their skills before computers and those who have never known other means of creating a newspaper page. It is a matter of aesthetics and I am on the side of those who respect the graphic artists who designed the types we read.

Those who conceived Times or Helvetica, or any of the many attractive types we use, designed it to have a given shape for each given height, not to be expanded or condensed mathematically, as is done on a computer. They amended those designs so that could appear in expanded or condensed versions, in bold and light face, in italic or other faces, without impairing the beauty and legibility which has made them so successful and thus widely used.
And to meet the specific needs of the newspaper industry, they designed type in a given range of sizes. The international standard is (perhaps WAS is more accurate in today's computer age) 18pt, 24pt, 30pt, 36pt, 42pt, 48pt, and so on up, in increments of six points or multiples of six points, to whatever maximum the newspaper permits.

Writing headlines to meet those inflexible requirements meant subs had to know their type faces and count every letter for its individual width value. This is made much easier with today's WYSIWYG computer screens. They do your counting for you, but they also tempt you to squeeze or stretch what used to be inelastic type to fill the line better, or to enlarge or diminish the type size for the same reason. Either of these actions destroys the appearance of the type itself and in doing so can hurt the planned appearance of the page.

As you will find out later, there is a reason for choosing one major headline type for a newspaper page and for balancing or unbalancing the weight of the headlines on it. When a headline is supposed to be 36pt and the sub-editor makes it 34pt, solely for convenience of writing, it looks out of keeping with another 36pt headline, and out of balance. There will be more talk of balance later. Here it is sufficient to offer a simple warning to all who use computers for sub-editing. Computers have many advantages over earlier sub-editing methods, but they have no aesthetic sense, balance or appreciation of art. They tempt lazy or incompetent subs to use quick and easy methods to achieve a less than good result. Worse, they deprive those who have never known or experienced any other system into practises which doom page make-up to a messy future. More about this in the discussion of page planning.

For the record, probably unnecessary in this gathering, the historic and conventional way to count headline characters according to their known widths. Individual letter widths vary from type to type, with those fonts which imitate a typewriter (Courier is one of them) giving every letter the same width, as was necessary with the measured progress of a typewriter carriage. This means a lower case "i" or "l" is allocated the same space as an upper case "M" or "W". Print fonts with rounder appearance run to the other extreme, with vast differences in width between "i" and "W". Only experience with type fonts and faces will alert you to these differences, and in this the WYSIWYG computer is a great help.

For ease in letter counting an average print face letter width has been established, on the basis that the most-used letter in English, lower case "e", counts as one. So do most other lower case letters but not all. The knack is to recognise the exceptions. The basic count system is:

i and l, half a character
f, g, h and most others, one character
d, w, two characters
numerals two characters
E and H and most Others, two characters
M and W, four characters
, and . and ! are quarter characters
By this means you can count in advance to know what headline will fit what space and make adjustments as and where necessary. It is often easier to detect what changes to make when the characters are in your own hand on a piece of paper than when they are on the screen. A simple example: the headline

Whales must be saved, says doctor

can be shortened, if necessary, to

Doctor says whales must be saved

by changing the upper case letter from a W to a D and also avoiding the comma.