

Elm Tip Sheet: Editing and Criticism

Before the reporter turns in a story:

1. Talk early and often. From the idea stage through revision, talk to the writer about the challenges the story presents and how he/she is addressing them.
2. Discuss story ideas with the reporter. The direction you provide at this stage can literally save work later in the process. Ask why we're doing the story now. Explain what angle you want the reporter to take and why.
3. Focus on the reader. Ask reader-oriented questions early and often, to keep a strong focus on serving the reader. Why will the reader care? Who is likely to read the story? How might they react to the story? What information can we give the reader?
4. Ask what the story is about. At various stages of a reporter's work on a story, ask what the story is about. Sometimes the answer will change from the rewriting, and asking that question repeatedly will help the reporter keep the evolving story clearly focused. Sometimes the answer will remain the same and asking the question will help the reporter stay focused.
5. Discuss records. Ask what records the reporter will examine. Start with general questions that push the reporter to consider where she might find records to help with the story.
6. Discuss data. Discuss where the reporter might find data to help with the story. Discuss access issues.
7. Talk about sources. Talk to your reporter about whom to interview and provide contact information if possible. Encourage writers to have at least two or three sources.
8. Debrief. After an interview, ask how it went. What did she learn? What surprised her? What moved her? What did she hope to learn that the source would not tell? Who else might have that information? Encourage the reporter to start writing, even if there is reporting still to do.
9. Ask about the lede. The reporter is probably thinking about the lede without prompting, but talking might help if he or she is struggling.
10. Talk about sidebars and graphics. Ask the reporter what facts you can tell better in graphics than in prose. Ask what points should be told in sidebars rather than bagging down the main story. Can a photo make a point better than prose?
11. Encourage rewriting. Perhaps the best way to see a dramatic improvement in a reporter's work is to encourage a reporter who turns in first drafts to spend some time rewriting. Don't approach this as remedial work, but as professional development. Even great stories benefit from some revision. Set a deadline for finishing the first draft, and another for the rewrite. Talk about specific things to look for in rewriting: strong verbs, sentence structure, redundancy, etc.

After the first draft:

1. Encourage alternatives. Encourage the reporter to try a different lede. Even if you like the first one, encourage trying a different approach. Coaching should not concentrate only on making bad work good, but on making good work, even great work, better.
2. Ask the reporter to read it aloud. If a lede is long or a story is laden with long sentences or does not flow well, ask the reporter to read it aloud. Often, that will help him or her identify fat sentences and weak passages. Also ask the reporter to read aloud the passages you love to underscore how well they work.
3. Suggest areas to condense. Avoid cutting stories yourself. Instead, suggest that a particular passage could be condensed, that a certain sentence seems too long.
4. Don't rewrite the lede. Tell the reporter what's wrong with the lede. Suggest possible alternatives. Demand a shorter, brighter, or clearer lede. But make the reporter write it.
5. Don't insist on your approach. If you do rewrite the lede, or suggest a different approach, don't insist the story has to use your lede or your approach. Explain why the story originally didn't work and explain the thinking behind your revision. Then challenge the reporter to write something better than either.
6. Explain editing changes. Whether you changed because of style, grammar, clarity, brevity, or some other reason, explain why you changed a story. Those changes will help a writer turn in a better story next time.

Questions to ask writers:

- What's the story about?
- What's your lede?
- What's your nut graph?
- What's new?
- Why are we writing this now?
- Why should readers care?
- What's your headline?
- What's the most interesting thing you learned in your reporting?
- What's your best quote?
- Who are the most interesting characters in your story?
- What does your reader need to know?
- How would you explain this story to a friend?
- What would make a good ending?

Editing Checklist:

Content

1. Does the lede capture the essence of the story? Is it short and punchy, usually no more than 25-30 words? Does it entice the reader to continue?
2. Does the story flow smoothly and logically? Is it architecturally sound?
3. Are there any holes in the story—an important perspective that's not represented, an obvious question left unanswered?
4. Are all the assertions in the story backed up by facts? Are all the quotes and facts attributed appropriately?
5. Has the writer provided appropriate background information to put the story in context? Will readers who are just reading about this for the first time be able to understand what's going on?
6. Does the timeline of events make sense?
7. Are the basic facts covered? Make sure names, dates, times, phone numbers, titles, criminal charges, addresses, web and email addresses are all accurate.

Mechanics

8. Are there any errors of grammar, syntax, spelling or style?
9. Does the story follow AP and the Elm's style guidelines?
10. Does the math add up? Do all the numbers make sense?
11. Is there any unnecessary redundancy or repetition?

Law, ethics and taste

12. Is the story fair and balanced? Does it present all sides?
13. Are there any potentially libelous statements?
14. Is the story written in good taste?
15. Does the story include any profane language? If so, does it conform to our standards?
16. Are there any references some people may find offensive?